

Rewriting Russia's past *Owen Matthews*

/ Eat meat! *Rod Liddle*

/ Is crypto back? *Matthew Lynn*

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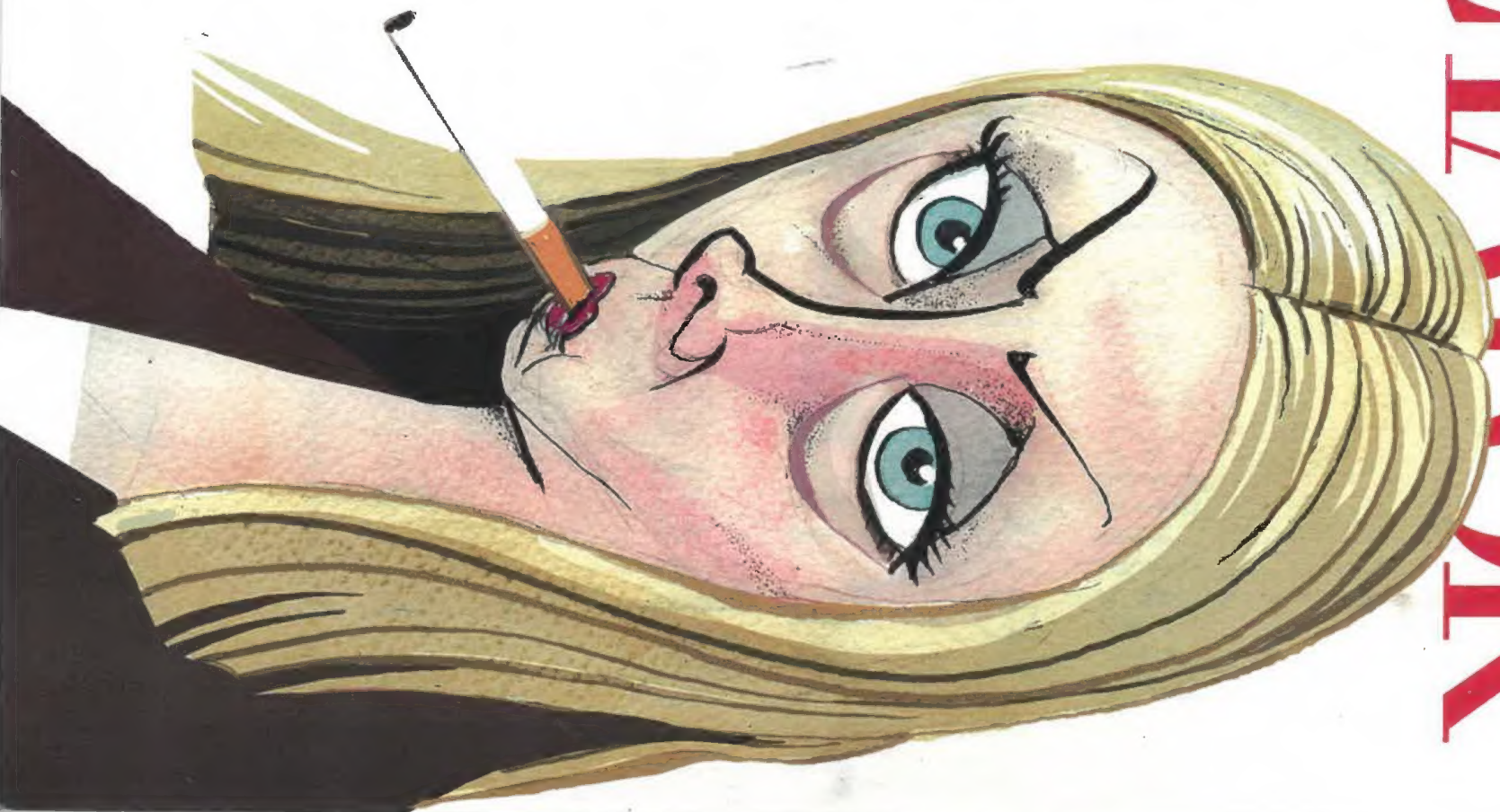
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THE SPECTATOR

Prima donna

Is Giorgia Meloni the most
dangerous woman in Europe,
asks *Nicholas Farrell*

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The new benefits trap

It has become received wisdom that Brexit has condemned Britain to chronic labour shortages. Many of the migrant workers who used to staff our hotels and restaurants, install our bathrooms and look after our children, returned home during lockdown and never returned. Sometimes that is blamed on the end of free movement, other times more generally on Brexit Britain somehow having become less attractive in the global competition for people.

It is a notion which is easily disproved, however, by a simple figure published this week by the Office for National Statistics which went woefully under-reported. There has been no drop in migrant workers in Britain. On the contrary, there were 6.3 million foreign-born workers at the last count – a record high. This amounts to an extraordinary 19 per cent of all workers – higher even than the United States. We don't hear much debate about these numbers. Perhaps that's because, since Brexit, immigration has become less controversial – as one would expect with the system now being under democratic control.

It is true that the number of EU-born workers in Britain has fallen slightly, from 2.44 million to 2.39 million. But this has been more than offset by the rise in foreign workers from outside the EU. This figure has risen from 3.37 million to 3.86 million. Indians, Nigerians and South Africans are now among the biggest groups of incomers.

This was one outcome which the Brexit project hoped for: that Britain would stop being so skewed towards European migrants and become more open to those from the rest of the world. That was the benefit of being able to set our own migration policy; we could tailor it to suit the needs of the UK economy instead of being obliged to enact rules made elsewhere. Post-Brexit, entry requirements were lowered for non-Europeans and we now

welcome as many migrants as at any point in our history.

Contrary to myth, Brexit was not about hostility to immigrants. Its supporters wanted to continue globalisation, but in a fairer and more sensible way. They wanted more border control to cope with the large demographic shifts across the world. It's no coincidence that since the EU referendum, Britain is now almost alone in Europe in having no populist party in parliament or with any serious support in the opinion polls.

However, the fact remains that there are huge labour shortages. Why does the number of vacancies stand at a near record high? The mystery can be explained by another

In lockdown, a system designed to help people into work was replaced by old-fashioned handouts

under-reported figure released this week. While there may be just 1.5 million officially unemployed, there are 5.3 million on out-of-work benefits – sickness, incapacity and so on. That amounts to on average 13 per cent of the working-age population, and closer to a quarter in Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Blackpool. Nearly a fifth of the population are on out-of-work benefits in Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool and Hull.

A record number of adults were helped into the workforce before furlough. But during lockdown, those reforms stopped. A system designed to reduce poverty by helping people into work – and to assess them according to what work they could do – was replaced by old-fashioned benefit handouts. Studies show that the longer people go without work, the harder it is for them to rejoin the world of employment – and furlough proved that point. As the pandemic subsided, extra effort should have gone into providing

job coaching and other support. Instead, that provision dropped. Now, those on Universal Credit can avoid having a weekly meeting with a job adviser by taking on just nine hours of work a week. Given the sheer number of job vacancies in Britain, the requirement should be raised to (at least) 20 hours.

The fact that 5.3 million are being kept on out-of-work benefits ought to be one of the most discussed aspects of British public life. But this scandalous number is not published by the government: it can be found only by diving deep into the official DWP database and even then it comes with a six-month lag. The figure is published regularly on *The Spectator's* data hub, but nowhere else. Such is the lack of attention paid by the Tories to the welfare reform project that was the defining mission of David Cameron's coalition.

There is still time to fix the labour market. The worsening economic downturn in Britain and America has some anomalies: by most people's definition the United States is in recession, yet its recent jobs figures were incredibly strong. Britain, too, is probably in a recession, but it currently looks like a shallow one and at present there is plenty of work available for anyone who wants it. Inflation is now officially over 10 per cent – with predictions that it may hit 13 per cent in October. But there are signs that it may then fall quite quickly.

That means now is the time for bold economic reform. For as long as the official number of job vacancies stands at almost twice the average of the last decade, there is no excuse for the Tories not to help people back into work.

It may not be possible to avoid recession, but a severe one could still be prevented. All it would take is a dedicated government that does not try to fool itself, or anyone else, about the size of the task ahead.



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Anna Keay is a historian whose books include *The Restless Republic: Britain without A Crown*. She writes about the wily Henrietta Maria on p36.

Keiron Pim looks at Will Ashon's oral survey of lockdown Britain on p40. His *Endless Flight: The Life of Joseph Roth* is published this autumn.

Our we-shall-not-be-moved resolve is a self-flattering delusion. In truth, the nut jobs do push us around and have been doing so for years.
Lionel Shriver, p26

I once saw a photo of a Chinese provincial home. The owner had a fabulous LCD TV rigged up to a satellite dish, but defecated in a hole in the garden. To me, this seemed an odd set of priorities.
Rory Sutherland, p61

PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK



HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

Home

The annual rate of inflation rose to 10.1 per cent, its highest since 1982. Average wages rose by 4.7 per cent between April and June, but inflation in that quarter left average workers 3 per cent less well-off than before. The supermarket Iceland was to offer customers interest-free loans of between £25 and £100, repayable at £10 a week, to help them buy food. Sir Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour party, called for £29 billion to be spent on freezing energy prices for six months for all consumers, rich and poor, partly to be paid for by extending the windfall tax on oil and gas. Railway workers belonging to the RMT union went on strike for another two days. In the week before 7 August, 1,924 people crossed the Channel in small craft, bringing the total for the year to more than 20,000. Removal lorries were seen in Downing Street while Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, was abroad on holiday.

Nine regions of England, including Yorkshire and Cornwall, were officially declared to be in drought. Rain then moved across the country. The leader of Plaid Cymru, which had readmitted the MP Jonathan Edwards after his suspension for assaulting his wife, called for him to leave the party again after Emma Edwards said she had not been contacted by Plaid Cymru during disciplinary proceedings. A skydiver who dressed as the Queen for a video at the opening of the London Olympics in 2012 was jailed for 18 months for pushing his girlfriend down stairs.

Britain approved a Moderna vaccine effective against both the original Covid virus and an Omicron variant; 26 million people will be eligible for a booster this year. The daily average for those dying with Covid fell below 130. The number of Covid patients in hospital in England was below 9,000, compared with 14,000 in July. Vaccinations for monkeypox were largely suspended because vaccine had run out; more than 3,000 cases had been reported.

Abroad

President Emmanuel Macron of France supported a proposal by the International Atomic Energy Agency for investigators to go to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Ukraine, occupied by Russia and operated by Ukrainian technicians under duress. A headquarters of the Wagner group of mercenaries fighting on Russia's side in Luhansk was hit by Ukrainian artillery. Blasts were reported in Russian-occupied Crimea a week

after explosions at a Crimean base left eight military aircraft destroyed or badly damaged. General Sir Jim Hockenhull, the head of British Strategic Command, told the BBC that Russia was moving forces from the Donbas to the Kherson area, which was under pressure from Ukraine. A ship chartered by the UN food programme and carrying 23,000 tons of wheat left Pivdennyi near Odessa, bound for the Horn of Africa. Germans must pay an extra levy of €480 on an average gas bill of €3,568, to meet the cost of finding sources in place of Russia. Argentina raised interest rates to

69.5 per cent as inflation rose to 70 per cent, its highest for 20 years. The Norwegian authorities killed a 94st walrus named Freya that had taken up residence in Oslo, for fear she might prove dangerous.

Si Salman Rushdie, 75, was severely wounded by a man who stabbed him on stage at an event at Chautauqua in New York state. Hadi Matar, 24, pleaded not guilty to charges of attempted murder. In 1989 the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, had issued a fatwa calling for Sir Salman's assassination for publishing *The Satanic Verses* in 1988. An Iranian spokesman said this week: 'In this attack, we do not consider anyone other than Salman Rushdie and his supporters worthy of blame and even condemnation.' A fire at the Abu Sefein Coptic church in the working-class Imbaba district of Giza in Egypt killed 41, including 15 children.

The US Department of Justice said that releasing details of the warrant used to raid Donald Trump's house in Florida last week could cause 'irreparable damage' to its investigation. Liz Cheney, a Republican critic of Mr Trump, lost the Wyoming primary to a candidate of whom he approved, Harriet Hageman. Deputy president William Ruto of Kenya was elected president but the opposition candidate Raila Odinga rejected the result. Scott Morrison, the former prime minister of Australia, secretly became joint minister for health, finance, the treasury and home affairs, according to Anthony Albanese, the current prime minister.

The Truss challenge

Whatever else you do, don't step backwards,' a man in the crowd shouts to Rishi Sunak as he stands on the edge of a swimming pool in the garden of a Tory councillor's home in Bushey, Hertfordshire. About 100 party members have gathered to hear Sunak's pitch. It's the first of three stops he's making before a hustings in Cheltenham. The leadership race will be decided by around 160,000 Tory members – and Sunak seems to be trying to meet as many of them as he can. On each visit he offers a version of his stump speech, including jokes about his height and how, unlike Boris Johnson, he looks as though his mother brushed his hair.

Every address he gives has a common theme: the economy. 'We know inflation is the enemy, it makes everyone poorer,' Sunak says. He positions himself as the candidate who tells people things they 'don't want to hear'. The implication is clear: he will speak the truth while Liz Truss will make promises she can't keep. Her allies say his agenda lacks ambition and that she's a woman of action – hence her pledge of tax cuts now.

Polls attest that Truss's vision is more popular with members, but Sunak's message is gaining traction in the southern 'blue wall'. It seems to go down well in this prosperous small town on the outskirts of north London. 'I think Liz will win but it's a great shame,' says Thomas, a pensioner. 'I've got a credit card, you can't put it all on the credit card.' Another man tells me: 'If she prioritises tax cuts for the well off, people won't forget that.'

This is Truss's challenge. The favourite to enter No. 10 next month, she faces a daunting first 100 days – to deliver tax cuts while guiding the country through crises in the cost of living and the NHS. Even her own backers privately have doubts about the high-stakes juggling act. 'We are stepping into the great unknown,' muses one Tory MP who would rather Truss than Sunak.

Both teams are in discussion with the civil service about their ideas for government. The Sunak camp questions the polls and believes that everything is still to play for. Despite predictions that 50 per cent of members have now voted, most attending campaign events are yet to cast their ballots. They're more likely to see Sunak than Truss who, as of this week, will be spending half her time planning for her premiership. Truss promises a September emergency

budget that will either make or break her as prime minister: tax cuts which she says can be financed by extra borrowing and would promote growth. She is reluctant to give any more details until the contest is over, but she'll have to take the edge off the energy price cap rise. A figure close to the centre of the party says there is recognition that this could require something 'radical'.

Kwasi Kwarteng, the Business Secretary, is expected to be her chancellor. The pair are old friends, having worked together on the *Britannia Unchained* book in their early political years. Both are members of the free market caucus of Tory MPs, and both strongly opposed Sunak's windfall tax. They live near one another in southeast London, along-

Dominic Raab won't be the only one sent to political Siberia. 'Gove is done,' says a Truss supporter

side fellow Truss backer Lord Frost. 'It's the Greenwich mafia,' says one supporter.

While no appointment has been confirmed, those close to the pair believe it could be the most amicable PM-chancellor partnership since David Cameron and George Osborne. A colleague predicts Kwarteng would 'facilitate, not emasculate'. 'It helps that he doesn't actually want to be prime minister,' says a party figure – who adds that Kwarteng, an Old Etonian, isn't so fussed about popularity. Which may be just as well given the spending cuts he could end up making.

One Truss supporter says the first test of her premiership will come when she names her cabinet. Will she go for vengeance, or seek to unify the party by offering posts to her critics? 'If it's a jobs-for-the-girls

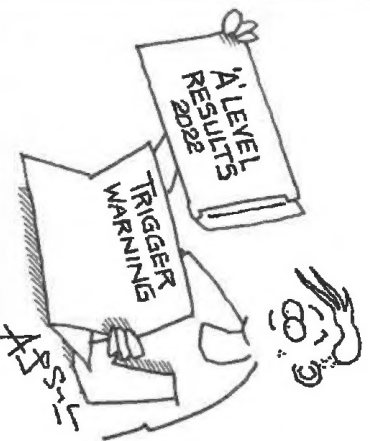
chumocracy, we'll know that her project is doomed,' an ex-minister argues. 'So we should know pretty soon.'

It certainly seems probable that under Truss, the number of women in senior roles would rise. Therèse Coffey, her closest political ally, is expected to retain an important cabinet job. Suella Braverman is tipped for Home Secretary after a tough negotiation saw her row in behind Truss, instructing her Brexiteer backers to do the same, when she was knocked out early in the leadership contest. The hope is that Braverman will be able to use her legal expertise to tackle the small-boat crossings. Other posts will likely feature Penny Mordaunt, who has endorsed Truss, and Kemi Badenoch, who has kept her powder dry after being knocked out of the race.

Meanwhile, Foreign Secretary could go to early Truss backer James Cleverly, a former foreign office minister – but Tom Tugendhat, who shares Truss's hawkish ideology, can't be completely ruled out. As for mending blue-on-blue wounds, Sunak will be offered something – although few think he will accept. Cabinet-office minister Michael Ellis is one of the Sunak supporters tipped for a role, but not many more are expected to join him. Dominic Raab, who has described the Truss economic agenda as a 'suicide note', is unlikely to be forgiven. Nor will he be the only one sent to political Siberia. Michael Gove – who backed Badenoch – is expected to be left on the backbenches. 'Gove is done,' says a Truss supporter, and there is little love lost between the two after several disputes during their time in cabinet.

Rewards for loyalty will likely extend to her staff team. While there is speculation that Lord Frost or No. 10 aide David Canzini could serve in Truss's Downing Street, her former adviser Ruth Porter, who has played a key role on the campaign and knows Truss well, is a probable pick for chief of staff.

Of course, all this planning could come to nothing. Sunak will keep meeting members and wearing out his shoe leather (he has, in fact, literally worn a hole in his shoe), hoping that the polls are wrong and that Truss might implode. But those close to both candidates think that, barring a miracle, the race is nearly over and Truss is only weeks away from becoming Britain's third female prime minister. 'She'll make it to No. 10, that's certain,' says one of her backers. 'It's making it to Easter that's harder.'



Prima donna

Giorgia Meloni is favourite to be Italy's next prime minister. What does she really believe?

NICHOLAS FARRELL



Rome
Giorgia Meloni's spacious office, on the top floor of Palazzo Montecitorio – Italy's House of Commons – has large French windows that adjoin its own huge rooftop terrace with spectacular views of the Eternal City. You could hold the party of the century up there if you were so minded.

Perhaps she will, if she wins. The polls suggest that Meloni, 45, is on the verge of becoming Italy's new prime minister in next month's snap election, which follows the collapse of Mario Draghi's unselected national unity government. The Brothers of Italy, the party that Meloni co-founded just ten years ago, which got just 4 per cent at the last general election, leads the opinion polls as the senior partner in the coalition of the right, which includes Matteo Salvini's radical-right Lega. The latter has fallen in popularity as fast as Meloni has risen. She may soon be the first ever woman leader of a still-macho country at the beating heart of Europe – as well as Italy's first democratically elected (as opposed to bureaucratically appointed) prime minister in 14 years.

Might this not all be a cause for celebration across the Continent? No way. Most coverage of her in the international press argues that she is not conservative or 'centre-right', as she claims, but something more sinister.

When we meet, I get straight to the point. Why is she nearly always labelled 'far-right' by the international press – which is the modern way of saying (but not actually saying) fascist?

She tells me it's a smear campaign by her political opponents, who are 'really well embedded' in the nerve centres of power: especially the post-communist Democratic party, which is polling just behind Brothers of Italy but without the necessary allies to form a winning coalition. 'Let's face it,' she says. 'The concerted attacks in rapid succession

[against me] can only have a single director. The left is in control of the culture. It is the mainstream. Not just in Italy. They launch the cry for help: and everyone jumps to it.'

So incensed is she by the charge of fascism that last week she sent a video to foreign correspondents based in Italy, in which she attests in three languages that she is not a fascist and poses no threat to democracy.

Pint-sized and friendly, Meloni certainly does not look or sound like my idea of a

When we meet, I get straight to the point. Why is she nearly always labelled 'far-right'?

fascist. She is dressed in a calf-length pleated white cotton skirt, a tight beige short-sleeved top and silver sandals.

She is accused of having a 'nakedly reactionary' agenda – largely, it seems, because of her hostility to illegal migrants and to 'woke ideology', which in a speech in America earlier this year she blamed for (among other things) 'destroying the foundations of the natural family'.

Meloni now accepts gay civil unions (which have been legal in Italy since 2016) but opposes gay adoption. She says that a child has 'the right to a father and a mother'. She opposes gender politics in schools, and what she calls in Italian-English 'la LGBT lobby'. A passionate, occasionally manic speaker, she famously shouted at a rally in Rome in

2019: 'They want to call us parent 1, parent 2, gender LGBT, citizen X, with code numbers. But we are not code numbers... and we'll defend our identity. I am Giorgia. I am a woman. I am a mother. I am Italian, I am Christian. You will not take that away from me!'

The speech went viral and was even made into a disco dance track which became a smash hit. I spot a framed platinum disc on the wall. Yes, it's for the song. She cracks up and says: 'It's not real! It was a present!' She laughs a lot.

She also smokes the odd ultra-slim cigarette. There is no denying that Meloni and her coalition ally Salvini take a pretty hard line on immigration. In the past eight years, about 750,000 migrants have crossed the 300 miles of Mediterranean that separate Libya from Sicily – many ferried across by NGO charity vessels on permanent standby. Such numbers make the fuss about those crossing to England from France seem petty.

Meloni has often called for a naval blockade to deal with the boats coming from Libya. 'Racists are cretins, OK? But that doesn't mean Italy must not co-ordinate its migratory flows.' Her favoured solution now, she tells me, is for the European Union to pay Libya to stop departures and take back those who make it to Italy. In 2016, the EU paid Turkey €6 billion to do the same thing – with mixed results.

'The EU, because those migrants irritated Germany, for once got its act together. We must do the same thing with Libya. Europe must strike a deal to stop the departures and open up hotspots in Libya to process asylum requests and distribute fairly across Europe only the genuine refugees. Borders exist only if you defend them. Otherwise they do not exist.' Italy 'needs a quota of migrants', she says. But 'the first rule is that no one must enter Italy illegally'.

Doesn't Italy need as many migrants as it can get? Its population is expected to decline from 60 million to 40 million by the

end of the century, because it has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world – 1.2 children per woman. Will it not soon be facing demographic disaster without immigrants? Well, the situation will not be helped if they are overwhelmingly men, she points out. 'The only thing to do is to solve the problem at home and place Italians in a position in which they can have children. Women don't want to have children, because they live in a society that makes them pay if they do. But they will, if instead they find themselves in a society that rewards them as mothers.' A maternity wage is 'a beautiful idea', she says, but there is already child benefit and instead she talks of free kindergartens that are open for longer, of maternity leave paid for by the state rather than the employer, and of reducing the tax burden on people with children.

It is indisputable that Brothers of Italy are the heirs to Mussolini, in the sense that the party was founded in 2012 by Meloni and others who had been members of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) which was set up in 1946 by former fascists. In 1995, MSI became Alleanza Nazi-

There is no denying that Meloni and her coalition ally Salvini take a pretty hard line on immigration

onale and rejected fascism. Its then leader served as foreign minister and president of the Chamber of Deputies in successive Berlusconi governments.

'I have no problem confronting this,' says Meloni. 'When we founded Brothers of Italy, we founded it as the centre-right, with its head held high. When I am something, I declare it. I never hide. If I were fascist, I would say that I am fascist. Instead, I have never spoken of fascism because I am not fascist.'

Plucking something from the depths of her phone, she tells me: 'Here's a declaration I made in 2006, nearly 20 years ago, that an Italian journalist published, a left-wing journalist – and I told him: "Mussolini made various mistakes: the racial laws against the Jews, the declaration of war, an authoritarian regime. Historically he also did other things that were good, but that does not save him."

It's not just left-wing international media that calls her 'far-right'; the right does it too, mainly because they consider her relationship with fascism to be deliberately ambiguous. In last week's video message she tried to address that: 'The Italian right consigned fascism to history decades ago, condemning without ambiguity the suppression of democracy and the shameful laws against the Jews.'

She says: 'In the DNA of Brothers of Italy there's no nostalgia for fascism, racism, or anti-Semitism. There is instead a rejection of every dictatorship: past, present and future.' What about those times when members of her party have been filmed doing the fascist salute? 'They are a tiny minority,' she says.

First Snow

I have in mind a snapshot of our son
Upheld by you in a prospect of snow,
Taken when he was less than half of one
On a cold mountain seven years ago.
It was the first snow he was ever shown,
Was blinded by and touched, and his cheeks glow.
His puffer suit is white. His hat is green.
Clearly the sky's unmix'd ultramarine.

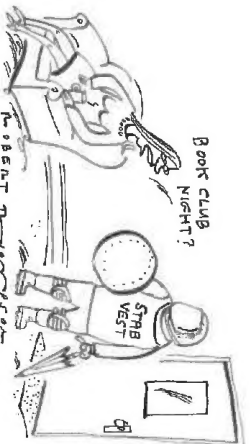
And I recall he slept a long time after,
Upright in the car seat I'd pulled from the jeep
And stood up underneath the cabin's rafters,
So we could eat a long lunch during his sleep
And he'd not hear the clatter of our laughter
While we'd in Vin Santo our biscuits steep.
He left no footprints in the snow that day
But made yours somewhat deeper I would say.

— Edward Clarke

'I've always told my party bosses, even in memos, to exercise maximum severity with any manifestation of imbecilic nostalgia because those who are nostalgic for fascism are no use to us. They are only the useful idiots of the left.'

Italy does have two openly fascist parties – Forza Nuova and Casa Pound. Both polled less than 1 per cent at the last general election in 2018.

The country's electoral system – a hybrid of first-past-the-post and proportional representation – forces the parties (there are currently 19 in its parliament) to form coalitions in an attempt to achieve a majority. In theory, the leader of the party in the winning coalition gets the most seats is appointed prime minister by the president. But there is no rule insisting that a prime minister must be an elected politician – and because no coalition since Silvio Berlusconi's in 2008 has attained a majority of seats in both chambers, no prime minister since then has been a party leader, and four were not even elected members of parliament when appointed.



Meloni believes this system makes Italian politics 'politically fragile and therefore unstable', and endemically short-termist. She wants to transform the Italian presidency from being largely ceremonial, and chosen by parliament, into a French-style one that is elected by the people. Her so-called presidentialism is backed by Salvini and Berlusconi (aged 85 but still going as leader of Forza Italia, the third major party in their coalition). It is a big theme of the upcoming election. Her opponents claim it is more evidence of the threat she poses to democracy.

Meloni has a strong Roman accent which makes her the Italian equivalent of a Cockney. She and her older sister Arianna were born and brought up in a working-class area of central Rome by her mother Anna, who (among other things) wrote bodice-rippers to make ends meet. Their father, an accountant, abandoned the family shortly after her birth to sail with his mistress to the Canaries in a yacht called *Cavallo Pazzo* (Crazy Horse).

Her father had not wanted a second child and so her mother had booked an appointment at the abortion clinic – but halfway there she stopped at a bar, drank a cappuccino, ate a briciole, and had second thoughts. Meloni would 'never ever' have an abortion, she tells me, but supports Italy's abortion law which permits it on demand up to 90 days. She herself has a five-year-old daughter but is not married to the father, a TV journalist, because although she believes

in traditional family values, he does not.

At school she excelled but could not afford to go to university and instead worked as a babysitter, nanny, nightclub bar server, market stallholder and journalist, before becoming a full-time politician. In her recently published autobiography, she writes that she signed up to the MSI at the age of 15 because the Sicilian Mafia had just killed the two top anti-Mafia prosecutors in Sicily. Desperate to do something, she chose to join because it was a fringe party that seemed untouched by the perennial corruption and uselessness of Italian politicians. At 31, she became the youngest ever government minister in Italy, as minister for youth in the last Berlusconi administration.

About six years ago – she is not sure exactly when – her estranged father succumbed to leukaemia in Majorca. ‘My father is dead and I do not feel any emotion towards him,’ she says. ‘This angers me, because I would like at least to hate him.’

She regards herself and Brothers of Italy as owing more to the late British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton than to the revo-

‘The flame in the Brothers of Italy logo has got nothing to do with fascism’

lutionary socialist Mussolini. In her speeches, she often quotes Scruton. ‘In all the many things he was so passionate about, from art and music to wine and being a country gentleman, he always knew how to embody the essence of conservatism as a way of life and never as an ideology,’ she tells me.

‘I believe that the big challenge today globally, not only in Italy, is between those who defend identity and those who do not,’ she says. ‘That is what Scruton meant when he said that if you destroy something, you do not necessarily do something new and better. I’d probably be a Tory if I were British. But I’m Italian.’

That’s why she does not agree with Marine Le Pen’s policies of massive state intervention in the French economy, which is closer to the national socialist elements of fascism – something that began, it is usually forgotten, as an alternative left-wing revolutionary movement. And she promises to cut, not raise taxes. On foreign affairs, she is feverishly on the side of Ukraine (there is a striking ambivalence in Italy about sending arms), declaring herself ‘on the side of a proud nation that is teaching the world what it is to fight for freedom’. She blames Joe Biden’s Afghanistan debacle for emboldening Putin.

One of her favourite mantras is ‘libertà’ (freedom), and her party was the only one to oppose Italy’s Covid vaccine passport regime, which was the most draconian in Europe, even banning the unvaccinated from

work. ‘They did things that in a democratic state should never happen,’ she tells me. ‘It is just surreal to think the state is telling you if you can or cannot work to earn a living to give food to your children. But they called us fascists because we contested the fact that people were no longer free.’

She is also inspired by another ‘giant of conservative thought’: J.R.R. Tolkien. Every 3 January, she marks his birthday on her Facebook page, which has 2.3 million followers, and this year wrote: ‘He brought up so many of us with his stories, so rich in values and meanings, which taught us to believe and to dream.’ She tells me that before we met, she imagined that I would look like Tolkien. ‘No! They used to call me Strider, Aragorn,’ I reply.

‘Me, Sam Gamgee.’

Why so? Because she was fat as a child. ‘But without Sam Gamgee, nothing, nothing could be done. The truth is Sam is much more useful than Frodo.’

She goes on: ‘*The Lord of the Rings* is not a book that teaches you something. It’s a book that helps you discover who you are, which is something else. Above all, Tolkien has given me this understanding that power is not a conquest but an enemy, a problem that you must keep under control, on a leash. But you are about to get power, I say.’

‘It scares me,’ she says.

We come back to the *f* word. Her opponents say no one will believe Brothers of Italy has no links with fascism until she removes the tricolore flame – the MSI’s old symbol – from the party’s logo. Why doesn’t she?

‘The flame in the Brothers of Italy logo has got nothing to do with fascism but is the recognition of the journey made by the democratic right through the history of our republic. And we’re proud of it.’

The closest Meloni gets to discussing fascism at any length in her book is near the end, in a passage in which she writes: ‘I have no fear repeating for the umpteenth time that I do not believe in the cult of fascism.’ And she describes Mussolini’s 1938 anti-Semitic laws as ‘detestable’. Why, I ask, does she make so little reference to fascism? ‘It’s something that does not belong to me,’ she replies. Do you believe her?

BAROMETER

Testing, testing

When were A levels first sat? They can be traced back to the Oxford Local, an external examination for schools instigated by Oxford University in 1858. Out of 401 candidates only 150 passed, with the *Educational Times* complaining that the questions were more searching than those on Oxford’s BA exam two decades earlier. – The first standardised national exam designed to be taken at 18 was the Higher School Certificate introduced by the Board of Education in 1917. In order to pass, candidates had to satisfy the examiners in a minimum of five subjects. The certificate was replaced by A levels in 1951.

Bone-dry Britain

How unusual is the drought?

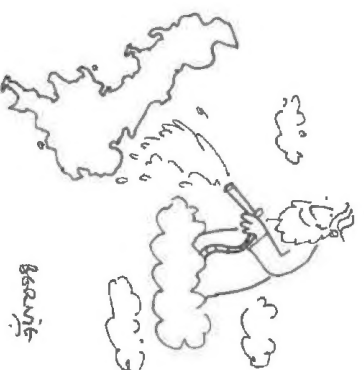
– This July was the driest month, averaged across England, since 1935, although parts of the south-east were the driest on record. – From January to July, Reading University measured **216mm** of rain, the third driest period since records began in 1908. The driest was 1976 (**159mm**) followed by 1944 (**188mm**). Over a slightly longer period, November to July, 2021/22 comes out as the third driest, with **283mm** of rain, behind 1988/89 (**277mm**) and 1975/76 (**240mm**).

Holiday count-up

The Prime Minister took a second holiday in the space of a month. How many holidays does the average Briton take in a year? – According to the ONS, UK citizens made **93.1m** overseas visits in 2019. Of these, **58.7m** were described as holidays and **23.5m** ‘visiting family and friends’. In addition, according to Visit Britain, British citizens took **60.45m** holidays in Britain, **19.83m** of which were four nights or more. – The figures don’t quite cover every holiday as they exclude UK citizens who took holidays in Northern Ireland. But, on the assumption ‘visiting family and friends’ is really a holiday, it suggests the average Briton is taking around **2.1** holidays a year.

Are we content?

Britain might seem to be in crisis, but how happy are we? – **25.5%** of over-16s reported a very high level of overall life satisfaction. – **46.9%** are ‘mostly or completely satisfied with their health’ (little change from pre-pandemic – it was **47.8%** in 2018/19). – **21.8%** say they suffer from depression or anxiety, up from **17.4%** in 2014/15. – **4.3%** say they are ‘fairly or extremely unhappy in a relationship’, down from **8.3%** in 2013/14. – **6.5%** of adults say they are lonely ‘often or always’ (up from **5.4%** in 2016/17).



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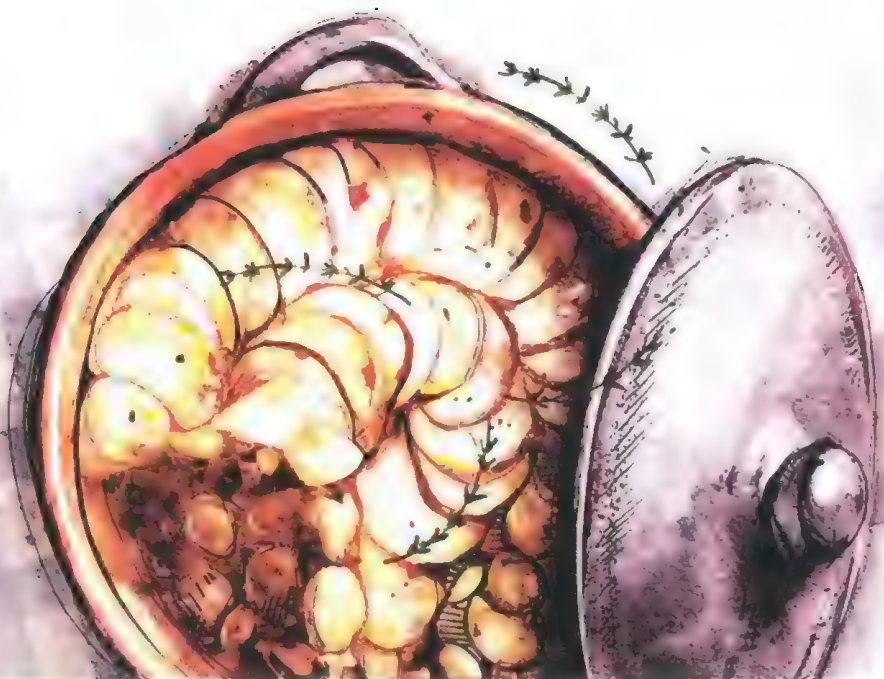
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Censors' charter

The hidden harms in the Online Safety Bill

JONATHAN SUMPTION



Weighing in at 218 pages, with 197 sections and 15 schedules, the Online Safety Bill is a clunking attempt to regulate content on the internet. Its internal contradictions and exceptions, its complex paper chase of definitions, its weasel language suggesting more than it says, all positively invite misunderstanding. Parts of it are so obscure that its promoters and critics cannot even agree on what it does.

Nadine Dorries, the Culture Secretary, says that it is all about protecting children and vulnerable adults. She claims it does nothing to limit free speech. Technically, she is right: her bill does not directly censor the internet. It instead seeks to impose on media companies an opaque and intrusive culture of self-censorship – which will have the same effect.

As things stand, the law distinguishes between online publishers (like *The Spectator*) that generate content and can be held responsible for it; and online intermediaries (Google, Facebook, etc) that merely provide online facilities and have no significant editorial function. Mere intermediaries have no obligation to monitor content and are only required to take down illegal material of which they are aware.

The Online Safety Bill will change all this. The basic idea is that editorial responsibility for material generated by internet users will be imposed on all online platforms: social media and search engines. They will have a duty to 'mitigate and manage the risks of harm to individuals' arising from internet use.

A small proportion of the material available on the internet is truly nasty stuff. There is a strong case for carefully targeted rules requiring the moderation or removal of the worst examples. The difficulty is to devise a way of doing this without accidentally sup-

pressing swaths of other material. So the material targeted must be precisely defined and identifiable. This is where the Online Safety Bill falls down.

Some of the material targeted by the bill is obviously unacceptable. Illegal content, such as material promoting terrorism or the sexual exploitation of children, must be moderated or taken down. Such content is already banned under existing legislation. It is defined by law and can be identified with a fair degree of accuracy. Some mate-

The whole concept of restricting material which is entirely legal is a patronising abuse of legislative power

rial, notably pornographic images, must be restricted to adults: in practice, this requires online age verification. So far, so good.

The real vice of the bill is that its provisions are not limited to material capable of being defined and identified. It creates a new category of speech which is legal but 'harmful'. The range of material covered is almost infinite, the only limitation being that it must be liable to cause 'harm' to some people. Unfortunately, that is not much of a limitation. Harm is defined in the bill in circular language of stratospheric vagueness. It means any 'physical or psychological harm'. As if that were not general enough, 'harm' also extends to anything that may increase the likelihood of someone acting in a way that is harmful to themselves, either because they have encountered it on the internet

or because someone has told them about it.

This test is almost entirely subjective. Many things which are harmless to the overwhelming majority of users may be harmful to sufficiently sensitive, fearful or vulnerable minorities, or may be presented as such by manipulative pressure groups. At a time when even universities are warning adult students against exposure to material such as Chaucer with his rumbustious references to sex, or historical or literary material dealing with slavery or other forms of cruelty, the harmful propensity of any material whatever is a matter of opinion. It will vary from one internet user to the next.

If the bill is passed in its current form, internet giants will have to identify categories of material which are potentially harmful to adults and provide them with options to cut it out or alert them to its potentially harmful nature. This is easier said than done. The internet is vast. At the last count, 300,000 status updates are uploaded to Facebook every minute, with 500,000 comments left that same minute. YouTube adds 500 hours of videos every minute. Faced with the need to find unidentifiable categories of material liable to inflict unidentifiable categories of harm on unidentifiable categories of people, and threatened with criminal sanctions and enormous regulatory fines (up to 10 per cent of global revenue), What is a media company to do?

The only way to cope will be to take the course involving the least risk: if in doubt, cut it out. This will involve a huge measure of regulatory overkill. A new era of intensive internet self-censorship will have dawned.

The problem is aggravated by the inevitable use of what the bill calls 'content moderation technology', i.e. algorithms. They are necessarily indiscriminate because they operate by reference to trigger text or

images. They are insensitive to context. They do not cater for nuance or irony. They cannot distinguish between mischief-making and serious debate. They will be programmed to err on the side of caution. The pious injunctions in the bill to protect 'content of democratic importance' and 'journalistic content' and to 'have regard to' the implications for privacy and freedom of expression are unlikely to make much difference.

As applied to adults, the whole concept of restricting material which is entirely legal is a patronising abuse of legislative power. If the law allows me to receive, retain or communicate some item of information in writing or by word of mouth, how can it rationally prevent me from doing the same thing through the internet? Why should adult internet users be infantilised by applying to them tests directed to the protection of the most sensitive minorities? There are surely better ways of looking after the few who cannot look after themselves.

It is bad enough to be patronised by law, but worse to be patronised by official discretion. The bill will empower Ofcom, the regulator, to publish codes of practice with 'guidance' and 'recommendations', which will become the benchmark for regulatory action against internet intermediaries. All this will happen under the beady eyes of ministers. Ultimate power lies with the secretary

It is no good saying Ms Dorries is a nice lady who'd never do anything horrid. Her successors may not be

of state, who can direct them to change their guidance and specify categories of material which she regards as harmful.

What might these categories be? The government's White Paper and public statements by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport suggest that they will include 'misinformation and disinformation'. There have been suggestions that this might include climate change denial and Covid disinformation. Ministers will say, citing section 190(4), that their policies are aimed at the public good, so that material which undermines them causes harm. It is no good saying that Ms Dorries is a nice lady who would never do anything so horrid. Her successors may not be. In a society which has always valued freedom of expression and dissent, these are powers which no public officer ought to have.

We had a glimpse of this brave new world during the pandemic. Facebook, YouTube and the like were keen to curry favour with the government and stave off statutory regulation by taking a 'responsible' view of controversial questions. YouTube's self-censorship policy was designed to exclude 'medical misinformation', which it defined as any content which 'contradicts guidance from the World Health Organisation or local

health authorities'. Criticism of government policy by David Davis MP and Talk Radio were temporarily taken down. The Royal Society, Britain's premier scientific society, proposed 'legislation and punishment of those who produced and disseminated false information' about vaccines. This kind of thing is based on the notion that intellectual enquiry and the dissemination of ideas should be subordinated to authority. What the Royal Society meant by 'false information' was information inconsistent with the scientific consensus as defined by some recognised scientific authority, such as themselves.

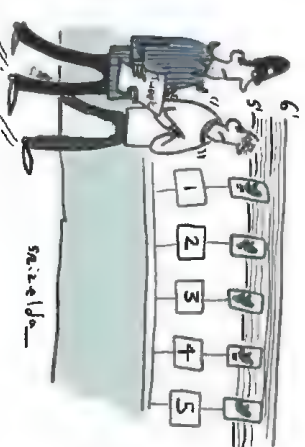
The Online Safety Bill has been put on hold until the new prime minister takes office. So it is worth reminding the successful candidate why Britain has traditionally rejected attempts by the state to control the flow of information. In part, it is an instinctive attachment to personal freedom. And in part it is a recognition of the politically dangerous and culturally destructive results.

All statements of fact or opinion are provisional. They reflect the current state of knowledge and experience. But knowledge and experience are not closed or immutable categories. They are inherently liable to change. Once upon a time, the scientific consensus was that the sun moved around the Earth and that blood did not circulate around the body. These propositions were refuted only because orthodoxy was challenged by people once thought to be dangerous heretics. Knowledge advances by confronting contrary arguments, not by hiding them away. Any system for regulating the expression of opinion or the transmission of information will end up by privileging the anodyne, the uncontroversial, the conventional and the officially approved.

We have to accept the implications of human curiosity. Some of what people say will be wrong. Some of it may even be harmful. But we cannot discover truth without accommodating error. It is the price that we pay for allowing knowledge and understanding to develop and human civilisation to progress.

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Lord Sumption and Baroness Nicky Morgan on the dangers of the Online Safety Bill.



ANCIENT AND MODERN

Truss, Sunak and Cicero



As Miss Truss and Mr Sunak spray policies around on a range of topics which they hope will appeal to Conservative members, Tory MPs agonise about whom to support, presumably with jobs in mind. The philosopher and statesman Cicero (106-43 BC) was more interested in a politician's personal qualities.

The Roman state was a *res publica*. At one point in his writings, Cicero rephrased that as *res populi*, which he interpreted as 'the possession of the people'. By that, he did not mean a democracy – Romans disapproved of the Greek experiment – but a state in which the people did have an active and meaningful interest.

Further, while Romans had duties and obligations to nations, citizens, family and friends, for Cicero it was their devotion to the *res publica* which counted more than anything else: 'there is no relationship that is more close or more dear than that which ties each one of us to the *res publica*'.

Given that indissoluble attachment, what sort of person is it that Cicero wanted to go into politics? At one level, a man whose relationship with the Roman people duplicated the characteristics of a true friend, i.e. affection (*amor*, 'I love', was the root of *amicus*, 'friend'), goodwill, mutual advantage, generosity and most of all good faith. But on top of that, Cicero identified a long and impressive list of abstract qualities, often expressed in terms of value-laden nouns, of which a politician should be an example to all: justice, magnanimity, physical courage, fortitude, humility, temperance, propriety and self-control.

Moreover, Cicero goes on, a politician must act solely in the interests of those entrusted to his care. There must be no scrambling for office; he must treat political opponents with courtesy and forbearance; the more successful he becomes, the more he should seek the counsel of friends; and he should steer well clear of sycophants. Men of this sort could be trusted with the security and prosperity of the *res publica*.

Truss and Sunak are keen to show their adherence to the Conservative party's principles. Do they have any message about what they expect of their MPs?

— Peter Jones

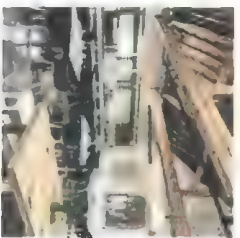
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Ignorance is bliss

My holiday from the news

ROSS CLARK

We are all supposed to remember where we were when we heard that Mrs Thatcher had resigned (my mother rang me while I was having a late breakfast). But I will always have a much more vivid memory of where I was when I heard Boris Johnson had called it a day. I was at a mountain refuge in Andorra when a Dutch hiker told me: 'I've just spoken to my wife and she tells me your Boris Johnson has resigned.' It turned out to be four days after the actual event. Between Boris appearing at his Downing Street lecture and me hearing about it I had managed to walk 100 miles across three countries, scale nearly a Mount Everest-worth of mountain passes and survive in my skimpy tent the foulest thunderstorm I have ever known.

To be about the last Briton to find out that the Prime Minister had quit is perhaps a bit embarrassing for someone who writes about politics. But there is something inside me that rather enjoyed being a latter-day Hiroo Onoda – the last Japanese soldier to find out that the second world war was over, surrendering on an island in the Philippines in 1974. Thanks to smartphones, holidays are no longer sanctuaries from the 24-hour news cycle. The blissful news blackout of a plane flight is being eroded as airlines start to relax a ban on mobile phones.

Even so, I managed to find the perfect place to take a sojourn from 2022. Several months ago, I reached one of those milestones in life which you can't ignore: I became old enough to move into sheltered accommodation. I thought I would mark the occasion by strapping on a backpack and walking the 500 miles of the Haute Route de la Pyrénées, from Hendaye on the French Atlantic coast to Banyuls-sur-Mer on the Mediterranean, taking in the highest peaks in between. This is a trip I had long wanted to do, but just lacked the time.

It is not a light undertaking. There is 150,000 feet of ascent along the way, much of it over boulders and paths of splintered granite. It is a province mostly of lone men with makeshift beards who can be seen skulking in the very occasional café, demolishing croissants as if it is their first meal in days – and it probably is.

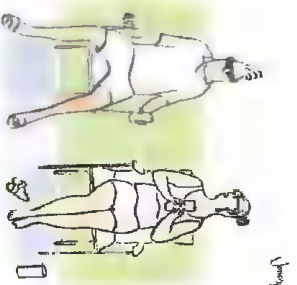
Unless you know how to field-dress a marmot, finding the calories to keep going is

as big a challenge as slithering up the slushy snow which overlays the fragmented glacier of Aneto, the highest peak. Once you have passed a Spanish convenience store freshly shuttered for its long siesta, it can be a four-day hike to the next one. The saving grace are the mountain refuges. They combine the dormitories of Dottleboys Hall and third-world sanitation with surprisingly good food, although I hate to think of the carbon emissions involved in helicoptering salads to a hut at 2,000 metres.

The challenge lies in trying to get the weight of your backpack down to the bare

For days I found myself tramping through zero-bar country, with no connection to the outside world

minimum, to the point I discarded any books, cut my maps in half and dumped my normal tent for a pricey but super-light bivvy bag which left me, during the thunderstorm, with an unfortunate choice: leave it unzipped and get wet or zip it up and suffocate. I met one hiker along the way who had managed to lose the sole pair of underpants he had brought on the trip – and, hurrying to a small



'The artificial lawn could do with vacuuming.'

Spanish town about to settle into its eight-hour siesta, could only find women's knickers to replace them.

But oh, the isolation. For days I found myself tramping through zero-bar country, two or three mountain passes a day, each three or four thousand feet high, with no connection to the outside world. Until, that is, I made a discovery: it was often possible to get a mobile phone signal just at the top of the peaks. From then on, the spell was broken and I found it hard to resist trying to follow the Tory leadership election, obtaining an update at each summit.

Even a few days away from the news seems to destroy one's judgment. The night after I heard of the PM's resignation, I awoke shivering at 5 a.m. as a rime of frost built up on the outside of my tent (it's a different world at 2,400 metres, even in a scorching July). No, it couldn't be Rishi Sunak, I reasoned – the business of his wife's non-dom status had fatally damaged him. Liz Truss? No, far too shrill. Tory MPs would see she would frighten the voters and never win an election. At that hour, all logic seemed to point to Sajid Javid – who, I learned by the time I had trod the scree to reach the summit of the 2,900m Puig Carlit, had been eliminated without even enough MPs to back his candidature.

When I arrived on the Med, 28 days after leaving Hendaye, I was fully back in touch with the news from Blighly. I learned that Britain was about to suffer a 40°C heatwave, which according to the Met Office meant it wouldn't be safe to go outside. And as if that wasn't bad enough, I read on the BBC that south-western France was apparently in the grip of a 'heat apocalypse' – which, although it had been hot, touching 37°C in the afternoon, came as a slight surprise given that I had just hiked 25 miles, passing numerous other unparched people on the way and failed to spot a single one of the wild-fires which had apparently consumed huge swaths of the country (although I did pass through some smoke outside Bordeaux on the train home).

Back to the world of news. It is fun, as ever, to be plugged back into our 24-hour media. But I have to say there are times I pine for my four weeks spent largely oblivious to it all.

Unfit for purpose

The General Medical Council has lost the trust of doctors

MAX PEMBERTON

Doctors make mistakes. We mess up, have lapses in judgment, do stupid or downright wrong things. Some break the law, some violate trust. Patients place their wellbeing, and sometimes their lives, in our hands. So it's only right that we are held to account. All good doctors want scrutiny.

Our regulator, the General Medical Council (GMC), is supposed to be there to uphold the standards of the medical profession. It's meant to help maintain the trust that the public places in us. This, of course, gives it an extraordinary amount of power: it can take away livelihoods.

But the GMC has lost *our* trust. Many doctors feel that the organisation is now out of control, hellbent on pursuing petty indiscretions above all else. Increasingly, it looks like a vindictive, sclerotic and overly bureaucratic embarrassment that assumes a degree of guilt from the start and aggressively pursues doctors as a result. After a number of appallingly misguided cases, the doctor's union, the British Medical Association (BMA), has called for a complete overhaul of how the GMC operates.

The impact of a GMC investigation, which is often deeply adversarial, cannot be overestimated. Decisions can take months, sometimes years, meaning that doctors are left in limbo for significant periods of time, frequently over bewildering, vexatious or inappropriate referrals.

Most doctors who have been referred talk about the tremendous toll an investigation takes on their mental health. In fact, I know this from personal experience: I was referred by a patient who made an incredibly serious allegation that I had assaulted them while assessing them in A&E. Despite two police officers being present throughout the assessment, and two other members of staff also accompanying me and there being CCTV of the entire encounter which showed I didn't even touch the patient, let alone assault them – the process took 11 months.

During that time I felt a cloud was constantly hanging over me. My sleep suffered and I lost so much weight that colleagues thought I was ill. A survey by the Medical Pro-

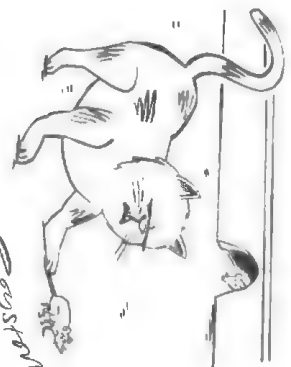
tection Society highlighted that 72 per cent of respondents felt their GMC investigation had a detrimental impact on their mental and/or physical health and, tragically, between January 2018 and December 2020, 29 doctors died while under investigation or being monitored. Five of these deaths were confirmed as suicides.

The BMA's call for a full review of the GMC follows a recent case which attracted the ire of virtually the entire medical profession. Dr Manjula Arora, a Manchester GP who trained in India before moving to the UK in the early 1990s, was referred to the GMC over 'dishonesty' relating to a laptop. The

Increasingly, the GMC looks like a vindictive, sclerotic and overly bureaucratic embarrassment

incident in question took place in 2019 and 2020 while she was working for Mastercall, which provided a clinical assessment service for the North West Ambulance Service.

Dr Arora had emailed her medical director to ask about getting a new work laptop and had been told that, while none was currently available: 'I will note your interest when the next rollout happens.' She later told the IT department over the phone that she had been 'promised' a laptop by the medical director. The GMC representative, Carl Hargan, accused her of lying about being promised one because the medical director's email was 'entirely unambiguous'.



'I'm afraid I planted that story about me being away.'

Because of this misunderstanding, Dr Arora had 'brought the medical profession into disrepute'. The tribunal (at which the GMC is represented against doctors by a team of its own lawyers) concluded that although 'Arora had not set out to be dishonest, and that she had not set out to mislead IT... she had exaggerated her position in her use of one inappropriate word'. The entire case, therefore, rested on the use of the word 'promised' and it was deemed she had been dishonest. After a nine-day trial, she was suspended for a month.

In an editorial earlier this year, the doctor's in-house journal, the *BMJ*, branded the case an 'embarrassment' for the GMC, one that had been pursued 'without an ounce of compassion'. It argued that the organisation has lost all sense of perspective. After a backlash, the GMC said it would not challenge Dr Arora's appeal and called for her suspension to be dropped by the High Court. But many doctors have seen this as yet one more example of the GMC fundamentally failing to assess what is and what isn't an appropriate referral.

Four years ago the profession was profoundly shocked by the case of Dr Hadiza Bawa-Garba, a junior doctor working in paediatrics, who was struck off the medical register after the death of a six-year-old boy. A tribunal had originally recommended that she be suspended for a year but the GMC appealed the decision and she was struck off. The case later went to the Court of Appeal and she was reinstated. That the junior doctor should have been held accountable and lose her livelihood in this way was awful; she was made a scapegoat.

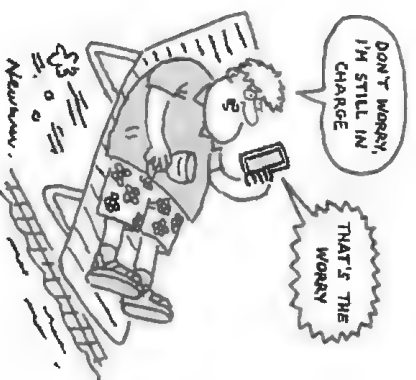
Few others were blamed. The consultant in charge on the day, and who was medically responsible for the young boy's care, received no formal consequences. The case was complex but there was a widespread sense that the GMC had failed to take into account the extenuating circumstances of the case: that the pursued doctor was the most junior member of medical staff; that she had just returned from an extended maternity leave; that three medical colleagues were absent for much of her shift; that she had had

no break; that there had been an IT failure at a crucial moment; and that the issue was related to safety in the NHS, not the failure of a single junior doctor.

The strength of feeling about the case was unprecedented. A *BMJ*-backed study looking into its impact summarised the concern: 'Many doctors felt that a distinction should be drawn between unintentional error and egregious violations, with an onus on systems as opposed to individuals, and that moral intention, as opposed to clinical outcome, should influence decisions on doctors' culpability in cases of harm to patients.'

It was argued that the GMC's approach led to a culture of blaming individuals without judging the system they are part of. Elsewhere, there were concerns that Bawa-Garba had been unfairly pursued and if she had been white (she is black, from Nigeria) the results would have been different.

Certainly the official statistics appear to suggest that something is going on. The GMC itself notes that doctors from ethnic minorities are twice as likely as white doctors to be referred by their employers for fitness-to-practice concerns, while the referral rate for doctors who qualified outside the UK is three times higher than that for British doctors. Indeed, the racial bias of the GMC



is one of the main issues that the BMA have raised in their complaint.

In another troubling case which caused widespread anger, a consultant urologist, Omer Karim, faced 'years of turmoil' after being racially discriminated against by the GMC. He had been referred to the organisation by the trust he worked for after he blew the whistle on bullying, discrimination and poor practice. He underwent a fitness-to-practice investigation by the GMC that lasted more than four years and in the end was found to have done nothing wrong. But in the meantime Mr Karim, a leading authority on robotic surgery in kidney and prostate cancer, lost his private practice. He felt he

had no choice but to leave the trust too, after a settlement that enabled him to work elsewhere in the NHS. He also sold his family home of 20 years and, in order to help with costs, his daughter left her private school.

In 2018 he brought claims against the GMC and it was found the GMC was 'looking for material to support allegations against Mr Karim, rather than fairly assessing matters presented'. Here was a body pursuing a case to make a point and avoid embarrassment for an NHS trust. The case also showed once again how GMC investigations can take years, leaving doctors – their lives and their livelihoods – hanging in the balance.

The BMA has argued that the GMC is imposing fitness-to-practise sanctions 'on vulnerable doctors in order to send a message to the wider medical profession'. Far from protecting the public and upholding standards, the GMC appears to be increasingly damaging workforce morale. Doctors now doubt that if they are referred they will be treated in a just and consistent manner.

We no longer trust that the GMC will treat us fairly and protect us from malicious or false accusations. And as any good doctor will tell you, once trust is lost, it's incredibly hard to win back.

Max Pemberton is a practising doctor and a columnist for the Daily Mail.

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Back on track

Might cryptocurrencies stage a return?

MATTHEW LYNN

This time it was surely all over. As inflation started to rise towards a 40-year high, as central banks started raising interest rates for the first time in more than a decade, and as the monetary printing presses finally stopped running, the cryptocurrencies crashed.

What a crash it was. Bitcoin, the best-known crypto, fell all the way from \$61,000 last November to less than \$19,000 in June, a spectacular drop of more than

two thirds. Ethereum, Solana and other, frailer 'coins' – as well as the even flimsier digital collectors' items known as NFTs – all tanked. This appeared finally to confirm what the doubters had said all along. Cryptocurrencies were nothing more than the latest in a long line of speculative manias: a 21st-century version of the Dutch Tulip Bubble of the 1630s. It was bound to pop sooner or later, and it had.

Hold on, though. In fact, something more interesting is happening. The cryptos may have collapsed, but now they are steadily coming back. Since the middle of June, Bitcoin has clawed its way to almost \$25,000. Ethereum has doubled in value during the last month, rising from slightly over \$900 to \$1,800. Solana has gone from \$30 to \$45. The list goes on.

None of the cryptocurrencies has yet got close to recovering their peaks, and this may turn into what the traders call a 'dead-cat bounce'. But the events of the past few weeks have perhaps started to look like a durable recovery, one that should run for several months.

This is what makes cryptocurrency different from typical investment mania. After the crash of the frenzied tulip market, the bulbs never came back (except of course in gardens). After the popping of the South Sea Bubble in 1720, the South Sea Company staggered on until 1853 but it never reached its former heights. Radio stocks, part of the huge run-up in the 1920s bull markets, didn't



return to their old prices after the Great Depression. The Japanese market, the biggest post-war bubble, is still a long way short of its 1989 peak. Once a real bubble bursts, it's over, and everyone moves on.

Cryptos are not like that. They remain an almost insanely volatile investment. If you bought anywhere near the top of the market, this has certainly been a punishing year to hold any of the main cryptocurrencies.

Speculators piled into cryptos during lockdown, partly because there wasn't much else to do

Even the jovially named Dogecoin, originally set up to satirise the whole crazy boom, fell from \$0.33 last November to just \$0.06, a fall of more than 80 per cent.

The stock market may have taken a pummelling over that period, along with most other assets. But it was the cryptos that suffered the worst carnage, burning a generation of investors who had jumped on the bandwagon as it gathered momentum.

So it was easy – too easy perhaps – to make a case that crypto was finished. The currencies never had any real substance, said the experts. They were the froth of the financial bubble, generated by a decade of ultra-cheap money during which central banks printed cash on an unprecedented scale. Speculators piled into them during lockdown, partly because there wasn't much else

to do. But as the easy-money era came to a crunching end, they were exposed as worthless.

Worse still, they had been sold as a protection against inflation: a form of digital gold that, because the supply is strictly limited, would hold their value even as governments debauched their currencies and drowned in debt. Yet once inflation did arrive, hitting 9 per cent or more in most major economies, the cryptos promptly collapsed. They weren't a store of a value after all.

And none of them, not even Bitcoin, is seriously used by the masses as currencies either. So what was the point of it all? Nobody knew – until the latest rally began, and suddenly everybody has begun to believe that crypto is 'the future of money' again.

Bitcoin has now been through four major crashes, and several minor ones. But every time it has recovered. In 2011, it rose from \$2 to \$32 in frenzied trading, then fell back to a single cent. In April 2013, it soared again, rising to \$260, before crashing back down to \$50. In 2017, it went on an epic bull run, going all the way up to \$20,000 before collapsing again, settling below \$12,000, and remaining in the doldrums for most of 2018.

Then came the epic charge of 2020 to 2021. Serious funds started directing serious money into cryptocurrencies and even NFTs. Elon Musk, the world's richest man, put huge chunks of his assets into cryptos.

Collapse seemed inevitable and it was. But that just seems to be what cryptos do. They boom, then bust, and then the whole cycle starts all over again. They may be heading south once more by the time you read this article. But here is the key part: each time around, the peak has always ended up higher and the floor tends to as well.

In that respect, then, cryptocurrencies are starting to look a lot more like a normal financial asset, whether equities, gold, property or the dollar. On the other hand, it's also possible that we've never seen anything quite like them.

MATTHEW PARRIS

What art will represent us?



It glows. The whole painting glows. Glows not just with the way the light from a fire unseen beyond the artist's frame reflects in his glistening eyes; reflects in the moist redness of his almost girlish lips; reflects in the folds of his turban and silky grey sash. It glows too from an inner radiation, glows from his character.

We have in Britain some arcane tax legislation that can bring a harvest that's anything but arcane. The recent acquisition of Joseph Wright of Derby's 'Self-Portrait at the Age of about Forty' (c. 1772) has been made possible 'in lieu of inheritance tax... under a hybrid arrangement and allocated to Derby Museums... with further support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund'. Private individuals like Robert M. Kirkland and other donors and foundations have helped too. The result is that the self-portrait of the great 18th-century artist of the Midlands industrial revolution has come home.

It has just been put on display, the centrepiece of an entire gallery room devoted by the Derby Museum and Gallery to their city's greatest artistic son. Wright doesn't just happen to come from Derby and didn't just happen to live in the English Midlands when Sir Richard Arkwright revolutionised the spinning industry at Cromford Mill, 20 miles up the river Derwent. These realities and this world made him, and made his art. There are such things as soundtracks to an era; there are also artworks that frame it for us – and Joe Wright has that distinction. He brings to us the excitement of scientific and industrial progress.

I went last week to see the acquisition in its new setting. It has been beautifully done. All around the walls are Wright's paintings: portraits, real and imaginary scenes, landscapes, families with wondering children caught by his brush as they gaze at scientific experiments, blacksmiths at their anvil. And in the centre, ingeniously displayed so you can walk round to the back of it, is the self-portrait: surely his best, self-consciously exotic and dressed up for the role of celebrated master of his art. And the reason you'll want to see the back is that, to save on expense, he used a canvass he'd employed for a first study for his famous 'An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump'.

I had an hour between trains, and took a taxi to the gallery, giving me about half an hour to inspect. I could have spent that time just staring at the self-portrait. Some paintings need distance, but you can get right up close to this, face to face with the subject. I almost feel I know him now.

Wright painted portraits, of course, for money. But with many of those on these walls one gets the strongest intimation that he knew and had judged his sitter. Look in particular at his huge portrait – the definitive work – of Sir Richard Arkwright; then at his portrait of the innovative Belper mill-owner, Jedediah Strutt (no knighthood because he was a convinced Unitarian). Strutt's belief in social obligation is still evident in the design

More than two centuries on, it's easy to see how Joseph Wright of Derby illustrated his era in the Midlands

and proportions of the mill-workers' houses he built, and when William Gaskell (Unitarian minister and husband of the celebrated novelist) visited Belper he thought it a shame there were not more factories owned by such 'men of enlarged benevolence and active philanthropy'. Sir Richard was altogether more ruthless: a hard-driving man. And you can see it in both portraits: Arkwright proud, fat, cocky, domineering; Strutt gentle, thoughtful-looking, with a kind of inner light. And then Arkwright's son Richard: expensively dressed, wife in a hat with bows big enough to dwarf Liz Truss's extravagances, her husband almost dandified with a hint of weakness in his face, the rich man's son.

There's no doubt that the paintings of industry and scientific experimentation

dominate the works. Alone, almost plaintive in the gallery company she must keep, is a huge portrait of an imagined American Indian princess, widowed, out on a hillside keeping watch over the sacred objects of her dead husband's inheritance. In the sky behind her is the most vivid painting of lightning I've seen. Perhaps Joe Wright sensed the portents for her way of life – just as in his beautiful painting of Needwood Forest near Derby, now part of the National Forest but then all but destroyed by an epoch for which, in a sense, Wright was the court artist.

I said earlier that epochs may have artistic backdrops just as they may have musical soundtracks. From the perspective of more than two centuries, it's easy to see how Joseph Wright of Derby illustrated his era in the Midlands. Two centuries from now, will there be fine art or sculpture that says 'early 21st-century Britain' with the confidence that Wright could command?

I cannot say I can see what the candidates might be, but perhaps that's because we're in the thick of it, and time will thin down the extraneous to the core. However I do think we can do it now for the 1950s, when I was a boy. That neon fluorescent light-changing installation that used to flash beside Waterloo Bridge in London; Henry Moore's strange figures; the look and feel of the Festival of Britain on the South Bank; Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, in the *Eagle* comic, with his evil adversary, the Mekon; and the germ-free, lifestyle-themed advertising that seemed to usher us into a world of hygiene and vitamins. I used to collect copies of *Do It Yourself* magazine, where you enter this world: 'contemporary' living; clean lines; wipeable Formica surfaces; domestic appliances that banished drudgery. This was a post-war Britain that felt as though we were inhaling the fresh air of modernity. Away with frills and dark mahogany wardrobes, in with fitted cupboards, Nylon and Bakelite.

These, alongside portraiture that had no time for detail and display, or impedimenta around the margins, no time for curtains and cushions and fussy book-lined backdrops, but tried to cut to the chase: these illustrated the age. An age of functionality, an age of reason, was at last upon us. It all feels so dated now, almost like a dead end.



'It's like being in government but with more to do.'

LIONEL SHRIVER

The shameful truth: terrorism works



This is a bleak version of looking on the bright side, but what's astonishing about last week's vicious stabbing in upstate New York is that such an attack didn't occur decades ago. However sickeningly incapacitated at present, Salman Rushdie himself would doubtless agree. Having survived unharmed for 33 years under a death sentence – endorsed by a depressingly hefty proportion of Muslims – was no mean feat. Yet that's too long to maintain nonstop vigilance. Little wonder that Rushdie and his minders let down their guards.

Coming unnervingly close to fulfilling its lethal intent, the frenzied assault at one of the world's most painfully harmless gatherings (and I should know) – the literary festival is wretched news not only for the esteemed novelist, his family, friends and readers, but for all writers and our audiences. Because, if experience serves, the response to this attempted murder is apt to materialise in two layers, like a gleaming vanilla icing slathered on a mud pie.

We've already seen the vanilla bit: fellow fiction writers such as Hanif Kureishi and J.K. Rowling (whose own life was threatened for expressing her solidarity) decrying the violence against one of our own and underscoring the importance of the right to free speech. Countless columnists have followed suit. However laudable, these exhortations fall sneakily flat. When couched in generalities, defences of free speech tend to come across as dreary and obvious (again, I should know). Only in the particular do these discussions get interesting.

We saw a similar uproar after the Islamist murders of *Charlie Hebdo* journalists in Paris in 2015, and not merely from the great and the good: huge candle-carrying crowds rallied around the slogan 'Je suis Charlie'. So the form is that we all agree we mustn't allow these dreadful people to cramp our style, declaiming that in western democracies it's the fanatics who have to get with our programme, not the other way around. In the face of efforts to impose sectarian blasphemy prohibitions on multi-faith western publics, the superficial lesson runs that free speech is our sacred value, which we'll not allow to be trammelled any more than Pakt-

stan allows the desecration of the Koran. In short: 'You nut jobs can't push us around.' We're nourished by our indignation and fortified by our rare unity of purpose.

Then there's the mud pie. Our we-shall-not-be-moved resolve is a self-flattering delusion. In truth, the nut jobs do push us around and have been doing so for years. The Anglosphere's cowed acquiescence to Islamist bullies was vividly on display during the 2005 Danish cartoons hoo-ha. While numerous Continental newspapers defiantly republished those satirical depictions of Mohammed to demonstrate that they couldn't be intimidated, mainstream print media in the UK, the US and Canada refused to – thereby crippling articles about an essentially pictorial story.

Tact or fear? British newspapers especially have no reputation for tact, so let's go for fear. These folks frighten the bejesus out

The UK abandoned the principle of free expression the moment it brought in laws against 'hate speech'

of us, and we'll do just about anything to keep from upsetting them. Terrorism works. Thus the mud-pie lesson most of my literary colleagues will derive from Rushdie's hideous mutilation is: 'Avoid writing about Islam at all costs, and never step on Muslim toes.' Multiple writers and editors have already observed that *The Satanic Verses* (1988) would never be published today. Rushdie himself might think better of writing it now. Contemporary publishing imposes a de facto fatwa on criticism of Islam.

Besides, absent jihadists, we push one another around. The UK abandoned the principle of free expression the moment it brought in laws against 'hate speech', which in legal terms lies entirely in the eye of the beholder. Unsurprisingly, hate-speech laws have continued to expand, vigorously enforced by constabularies who find persecuting Twitter perps more rewardingly trendy, and less dangerous, than arresting armed burglars. Britain has formally elevated the non-right to not be offended over the real right to say what you like. The omniously broad ban may or may not make it

into the final Online Safety Bill, but for a prohibition against 'legal but harmful' content to have made it into any version speaks volumes. Even 'causing anxiety' in Britain is a criminal act.

As many Muslims claim the book hurts their feelings, legally *The Satanic Verses* is hate speech. It's a small step from there to the conclusion that last week Rushdie got what he had coming.

I had a revealing exchange at another painfully harmless literary festival last year when once more discussing the – to me – cut-and-dried question of whether white writers should feel free to craft non-white characters (yes; next). An audience member asked: 'Isn't it really a question of respect?' I said certainly not. I said I was under no obligation to 'respect' my own characters, whom I often subject to derision. (Good lord, I can gleefully kill my characters, and smite them with all manner of humiliations beforehand.)

This 'respect' business is the nugget. We no longer understand the word. Real respect is never owed but earned, and once upon a time we doled it out to those we deemed worthy of our regard and withheld it from the undeserving. Obsessed with sanctified 'identities', we're now required to respect everyone, even make-believe characters – so we can hardly blame Muslims for demanding 'respect' for their prophet, whom non-Muslims and lapsed Muslims such as Rushdie don't necessarily revere. By extension, if the Church of the Garden of Eden declares that eating apples offends their faith, we've all to forego Bramley farts.

The most effective reply to Rushdie's maiming would surely be axing the Online Safety Bill and repealing every single hate-speech statute. (Fat chance.) Otherwise, maybe a public campaign to buy *The Satanic Verses* until the novel hits number one on Amazon. A more whimsical riposte? Worldwide on the same day, every mainstream western publication runs a headline asserting that a certain someone 'has a poopy face'. There's safety in numbers, and the crazies are spread too thin to go for all of us.

SPECTATOR.CO.UK/LIONELSHRIVER
The argument continues online.

No competition

Sir: Ross Clark's compelling critique of the water companies comes to the wrong conclusion ('Water isn't working', 13 August). He is right to say that water privatisation has been a failure, but this was inevitable given the nature of the industry – a monopoly providing an essential public service. Clark's suggestion that there should be more competition is unworkable for the simple reason that there is too much fixed investment stretching back to the 19th century and we all have only one pipe into our homes. There are parallels with the rail industry, where a quarter of a century of trying to introduce competition has resulted in a handful of open access services and vastly higher costs. The need for regulation, price controls and social provision result in what I have called 'faux capitalism'. Capitalists should stick to industries where genuine entrepreneurs can make more money by selling more, not by trying to outdo – often all too easily – the regulators.

*Christian Wolmar
London N7*

Regulatory failures

Sir: I worked at Thames Water in 1995 and recall the company campaigning enthusiastically to build a new reservoir near Abingdon. The rationale given was that the consequent increase in the company's capital spending would persuade the regulator to allow Thames to raise bills by more than the standard inflation-based amount. So I doubt Ross Clark's statement that our water companies show a 'reluctance to invest in new infrastructure other than that required to meet regulator demands'. However, if the costs to the water companies of breaking the regulator's rules and failing its targets are less than what it would cost to properly maintain the infrastructure, it is no surprise that they do.

Clark fingers the Environment Agency for some misguided decisions over the years. In the past few decades, Britain appears to have lost the ability to construct badly needed strategic infrastructure – reservoirs, roads, oil refineries, power stations. Perhaps in a future piece, Clark could review the agency's baleful role in bringing about our current malaise.

*Richard North
Hayling Island, Hampshire*

Lower the flow

Sir: Martin Vander Weyer (Any other business, 13 August) informed us that a friend had 'radically reset' his boiler to improve its efficiency. Greg Jackson,

founder of Octopus Energy, has easier advice for those with condensing combi boilers: turn the flow rate down to 60 degrees. The Heating and Hot Water Council says this could save 6 to 8 per cent on gas bills. Do it now, ready for winter.

*Eddie Hughes
MP for Walsall North*

Yours truly

Sir: I have often inflicted my unsolicited opinions on Christopher Howse, the *Telegraph* letters page editor ('Send off', 13 August). As he is leaving his role, I would like to thank him both for the immense patience with which he's endured my relentless verbiage and for the occasions when he's favoured me by printing a missive. The feeling of contributing to the conversation when you see your name on the page is a truly precious moment.

*Robert Frazer
Salford, Lancashire*

My work is done

Sir: As a fairly regular correspondent to a number of periodicals, I greatly enjoyed

Christopher Howse's piece on the joys of editing a newspaper letters page. Over the years, letters of mine have achieved most of the coveted positions. If this – a letter about writing letters – makes it, I shall regard my work as done, sit back in my armchair, and triumphantly unwrap a Werther's Original.

*Christopher Goulding
Newcastle upon Tyne*

The brothers Monsarrat

Sir: I was interested to read the review of *Uncommon Courage: The Yachtsmen Volunteers of World War II* (Books, 13 August). My father, Derys Monsarrat, was Nicholas's younger brother, and although he started out by crewing for Nicholas, he became perhaps the better sailor, winning the Treaddur Bay Sailing Club Novice Cup and Regatta Cup in 1930 when he was only 16.

Unlike Nicholas, he joined the army rather than the navy at the outbreak of war, and was sadly killed in North Africa in 1943, when I was too young to remember him. Later Nicholas wrote a book called *My Brother Derys* in which he describes their sailing exploits. His description of the agonising tension which builds up at the beginning of a race, as the boats jockey for position on the starting line, would be recognised by anyone who has ever done any competitive sailing. The final sentence in the book about Derys reads: 'I wish I had known him better.' Me too.

*Gillian Ford
Dorchester, Dorset*

Memories of Mickey

Sir: Your letter from Vida Saunders about her father's devotion to *The Spectator* (Letters, 13 August) reminded me of our life in Abadan, Persia, in about 1939, and as children playing with Mickey Bayandor, surely Vida's father. At last we have found out what happened to him after the war scattered us across the world.

*Shirley Campbell
Leominster*

All kinds of readers

Sir: Tony Devenish's letter in last week's magazine mentions a 'typical *Spectator* reader'. I don't know what that is; I've been a subscriber for many years, as I have to *Private Eye* and the *Guardian*. I have never voted Conservative and cannot ever imagine doing so. I enjoy the *Spectator* for the quality of its writers, for its arts reviews, and for the stimulation of reading opinions directly opposing my own.

*Paul Dodd
Bromsash, Herefordshire*

SPECTATOR
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On the House

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The realpolitik of Saudi oil profits and that infamous fist-bump



tage, and the pariah that is Putin's Russia as a regime they can do business with. That's the realpolitik – and it ain't going to help any of us through the current energy crisis.

Flattening the peak

Speaking of which, there's small comfort to be had from the news that Centrica's Rough gas storage site under the North Sea off the Yorkshire coast – whose closure in 2017 was lamented by James Forsyth last week

– has been approved for reopening next month. Even if the facility only holds a few days' worth of fuel, it should ease the risk of shortages and shutdowns at periods of peak demand. But there's no practical proposal so far that comes close to addressing the central and most certain feature of this crisis, which is the rise and rise again of domestic and business energy bills, driven inexorably by the global price of gas.

Sir Keir Starmer's proposal of a temporary consumer price freeze, costly to the Treasury though it would be, might have some merit if it would subdue inflation and hold off business bankruptcies as well as meeting the urgent priority of allowing poorer households to stay warm through the winter. But it's not going to happen, because he's not in power and a Truss government, if that's what's coming, isn't going to borrow it from him.

Instead we're promised unfocused tax cuts plus possible reductions in VAT and green levies. But what the new administration should borrow, whether from policy thinkers of any stripe or from the energy companies themselves, are ideas that might create a less crisis-prone energy market while flattening the peak and spreading the impact forward beyond the point (most likely following an eventual ceasefire in Ukraine) at which gas prices begin falling back to normality.

Best so far is a scheme floated by Scottish Power and Eon (and reported in the *Sunday Times*) for a bank-funded, government-backed 'deficit fund' that would enable suppliers to cap customers' bills for two years

uncoupled from global prices, borrow the resultant shortfall and pay it back over ten to 15 years. Let's face it, ministers alone can't repair the ravages of this geopolitical earthquake, nor can the forces of free-market capitalism. But an enlightened combination of 'whatever it takes' government and long-term strategic business leadership surely holds that power.

The Brits are back

At least I've spotted one entrepreneur with a spring in his step, despite all of the above: he's the local estate agent in *La France profonde* and he's never been busier. French city-dwellers took to buying rural property during the pandemic and haven't stopped. More surprisingly, he tells me, 'the Brits are back' after several years in which many sold up and returned to Blighty. This summer – despite the weak pound, reinforced pet passport bureaucracy and the Schengen area's rolling-90-days-in-180-residency limit – British buyers are so keen that some sales are completed without a visit, merely on the basis of a FaceTime tour.

What's happening? The surge is in part a spin-off from what Righimove calls the 'frenzied' rise of UK house prices over the past two years. This month's seasonal dip may herald a weaker market in the autumn – but even so, if you can sell your suburban semi for a million, less than half the proceeds will buy you a small medieval chateau in my own Dordogne village or a farmhouse with two letting gites just over the hills in the Lot. And despite inflation, the cash left over could fund you for a decade.

The other factor is relentless doomsterism from home. Try sitting on a sunlit French breakfast terrace listening to the *Today* programme's recital of miseries to come, from power cuts and crop failures to NHS collapse. Last week's *Spectator* Diary by Sarah Vine, sent from a few miles further south, caught that feeling exactly. Her punchline, 'You know where to find me, *Somei*', summed up a property boom no one saw coming.

How outraged should we be that Saudi Aramco has reported a world-record quarterly profit of \$48 billion, representing a giant bonus from the global oil price spike provoked by the war in Ukraine? Well, that's how the cookie crumbles when you're sitting on oil reserves so abundant and so easily accessible that your marginal cost of producing the next barrel is less than \$10 when the market price has just doubled to \$130 – as it did in March, before settling back to around \$95 today.

And you might think that this recent price retreat is likely to continue as oil demand begins to shrink with the onset of recession in developed economies – just as you worry that your own reserves will one day dwindle. So repping maximum short-term returns is the best thing you can do for your still undeveloped desert country, especially if (as Aramco likes to do) you can present a narrative about reinvesting some of the proceeds in hydrogen and other green technologies that will eventually take you to net zero.

That's evidently the way Saudi leader Mohammed bin Salman – MBS for short, best known for denying that he ordered the murder of the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi – was thinking last month at the moment of his infamous fist-bump with Joe Biden in Jeddah. That gesture of deferential recognition by the US President, and his request for help to ease oil supply, earned what was widely called 'a slap in the face' from the Saudi-led Opec group of oil-producing countries, in the form of a token 100,000 barrels-per-day production increase – when Opec's own forecast says daily global demand is about to exceed 100 million barrels.

Meanwhile, MBS's kinsman Prince Alwaleed bin Talal is reported to have invested half a billion dollars in three sanctioned Russian oil companies, Gazprom, Rosneft and Lukoil, just as the war was kicking off. To answer my opening question, outrage at any one-off windfall profit is generally pointless – but what this story tells us is that the super-rich Saudis regard western powers as supplicants who can be gained to advan-

BOOKS & ARTS



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David Warner in 'Time Bandits' (1981)
Tanya Gold – p42

Anna Keav describes how Charles II's beautiful, fun-loving wife was seen as a Lady Macbeth figure by Parliamentarians

Scott Bradfield pictures Harpo Marx playing jacks with his daughter at midnight on the bathroom floor

Nicholas Lezard can't bring himself to reveal all that Aleister Crowley got up to

Andrew Rosenheim finds cosy crime flourishing this summer
Joshua Lieberman sees Philip Guston exhibited, censored and chastised –

much like the Nazis did to 'Degenerate Art'

Lloyd Evans learns that doctors are rewarded each time they send a corpse to a crematorium

James Delingpole reports that identity politics is in retreat in Hollywood

BOOKS

The Russian enigma

Nothing is certain in a country where the past is constantly rewritten, says Owen Matthews

Russia – Myths and Realities: The History of a Country With an Unpredictable Past

by *Rodric Braithwaite*
Profile, £16.99, pp. 224

The Shortest History of the Soviet Union
by *Sheila Fitzpatrick*
Old Street, £12.99, pp. 256

Enforced brevity focuses the mind wonderfully. And when the minds in question are two of the West's most interesting historians of Russia, the result is a distillation of insight that's vitally timely. Sir Rodric Braithwaite was Britain's ambassador to Moscow from 1988-92 during the collapse of the USSR (where he was the boss of Christopher Steele, of Trump dossier fame), then chaired the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee. He went on to write the brilliant *Afghanty*, a history of the USSR's disastrous Afghan war and its impact on the Soviet Union's collapse, and *Moscow 1941*, a people's history of the heroic Soviet fight against Nazism. Sheila Fitzpatrick is an Australian historian who has been writing about Soviet education, culture and politics since the 1970s. Both have now produced brief and highly readable histories of, respectively, Russia and the USSR that channel the pithy, punchy spirit of the great Norman Stone's short histories of Turkey and Hungary.

Fitzpatrick's book, covering 70 years rather than more than a millennium, is inevitably the more detailed. One of the great virtues of such short histories is that they emphasise what specialists may regard as the bleeding obvious – but it is the obvious truths often buried in detail that bear restating. For instance, there is the paradox that the Bolshevik revolution was led in large part by members of national minorities – from Jews to Georgians to Latvians and Poles – who had suffered under the Russian empire yet ultimately recreated it. And there is the often forgotten fact that despite the bloodshed and political repressions of the USSR, the Soviet century saw life expectancy double and university education quintuple. 'For many Rus-

sians, whose birth state [the USSR] was, the narrative was different' from the West's view of Soviet history, she writes:

Coming out of backwardness, Russia had miraculously won its 20th-century place in the sun, first leading the world towards socialism and later becoming a superpower – and then all that was suddenly snatched away for no apparent reason, along with the respect of the world and the empire inherited from the Tsars.

There are many surprises here even for cognoscenti of Russian history. Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin to the 20th Party Congress was labelled 'the Secret Speech' in the West in part because of a feeble attempt to keep its contents from being published abroad. But, as Fitzpatrick

In a 2017 opinion poll, Russians chose Putin, Stalin and Lenin as their 'most respected' leaders

reminds us, 'domestically it was no secret at all, for it was read out in its entirety at party meetings held throughout the country (and open to those who were not party members) ... Passionate public discussion followed.'

There are a few odd omissions and errors. Fitzpatrick lists Lenin's ancestry as having 'some German and Jewish in the mix', but doesn't mention his half-Kalmuk mother, from whom the Bolshevik leader inherited his distinctly Central Asian features. Nikita Khrushchev did not 'secretly send some intercontinental nuclear missiles' to Cuba; he sent medium and intermediate-range missiles to the Caribbean precisely because stockpiles of intercontinental ones that could strike the US from the USSR were vanishingly small. The resulting massive increase in Soviet capacity to strike America was the whole point of the ensuing crisis. And she writes that 'as luck would have it, 1986 was the year that oil prices started going down from their historic highs of the 1970s and early '80s' – a crash that, according to the leading reformer and economic historian of the USSR Yegor Gaidar, led directly to the collapse of a Soviet state that had become fatally dependent on petrodollars. But 'luck'

had nothing to do with it. The price crash was the result of a deliberate US government policy to persuade the Saudis to punish Moscow for the invasion of Afghanistan and was championed by the flamboyant Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson.

Braithwaite's narrative, from the origins of Kievan Rus to Putin's invasion of Ukraine, is wise and thorough. It's the work of a man with a deep inside knowledge of and sympathy for Russia's people and their culture. 'The Russians are fascinating, ingenious, creative, sentimental, warm-hearted, generous, obstinately courageous, endlessly tough, often devious, brutal and ruthless,' writes Braithwaite. But despite his obvious affection, he remains clear-eyed about their 'underlying and corrosive pessimism' and 'resentment that their country is insufficiently understood and respected by foreigners'.

A key theme is the mismatch between Russia's superficially western culture and more profound, ethnonic strains of mysticism and traditionalism that have periodically risen and fallen over the past three centuries. Peter the Great declared that, thanks to his modernising efforts, 'We have come out of the darkness into the light and people who did not know us now do us honour'. But to the snide 19th-century French traveller the Marquis de Custine, the result was a patchily civilised aristocracy which reminded him of 'trained bears who made you long for the wild ones'. For the Slavophile historian Nikolai Karamzin: 'We became citizens of the world but ceased in certain respects to be citizens of Russia. The fault is Peter's.' Vladimir Putin, unfortunately, evidently agrees.

Another theme is the use and abuse of history in 'a country with an unpredictable past' – as Braithwaite's subtle notes, quoting an old Soviet joke. Every country has 'a national narrative constructed from fact, fact misremembered, and myth', he writes. 'They hold us together in a "nation" and inspire us to sacrifice ourselves in its name.' But nowhere else in the modern world has seen history so recently and vehemently twisted to create an ideological framework and justification for aggression and repres-

wedding photographer, Amy, recognises Ed from a chance encounter as children and his story starts to change.

Norris, who teaches creative writing at the University of Oxford, does a great deal with time in *Undercurrent*, both structurally and mechanically. Most of the narrative unfolds throughout 2019, but we also loop back through the 20th century to explore Ed's family, who come from a Welsh sheep farm. First stop is 1911 India, where we meet Phoebe, who will become Ed's great-grandmother after she marries Arthur, who brings her home to Wales.

Norris writes to slow down time, to remind us to grab it rather than watch it drift past. Otherwise, like Ed, we'll always imagine there'll be more time. 'Who doesn't?' Enough happens to propel the plot, but this is a book to savour for what goes on inside Ed's head as much as outside as he grapples with the weight of his family's history. He is consumed by the concept of home and what it means:

Home, an idea which is constructed out of place, people, and stories above all. A synonym for love. It's the memory of Christmases when no one had to worry where to spend them, where to go. The memory of a childhood when nothing was complicated. If such a thing ever really existed at all.

Later, driving with Amy for a holiday in Cornwall, Ed ponders:

These escapes. These brief freedoms that come round like choruses in the song of our long, loving goodbye to the life that has been lent us. I never quite know what they mean. Are we really travelling outwards when we drive into the countryside, or are we trying, somehow, to return home? Is the journey really back and in, a reach for memory?

If Norris's prose sometimes feels a bit metaphor heavy there are a lot of tides and currents – he can be forgiven in a book this beautiful and useful. His writing untangles the knots that tie us down, to families, to history. He writes to free us and deserves our thanks.

A shaggy drug story

Andy Miller

Industry of Magic & Light

by David Keenan

White Rabbit, £18.99, pp. 250

The Scottish writer David Keenan has published five novels in five years: *This is Memorial Device* (2017), *For the Good Times* (2019), *Xstabeth* (2020), last year's magnum opus *Monument Maker* and now *Industry of Magic & Light*. At a comparatively modest 250 pages (*Monument Maker* weighed in at more than 800), it is practically a novella, or perhaps the sort of pamphlet one might once have picked up in a 'head shop' such as Compendium Books in Camden. The last book of Keenan's I reviewed

here I described as 'either a cycle of novels or one vast fictional gallimaufry' – to which I now approvingly add a third category. *Industry of Magic & Light* confirms the enterprise as a shaggy drug story:

Then the main band came on. I thought they had been on already. And maybe it was the LSD. But I started to get it... this music was like a split second of that music only extended forever, like a magnification of that music, I thought to myself, like an atomic vision of that music, and I thought of atoms, and of splitting the atom, and of how that was how it all had come about in the first place; and that's when the devil appeared to me.

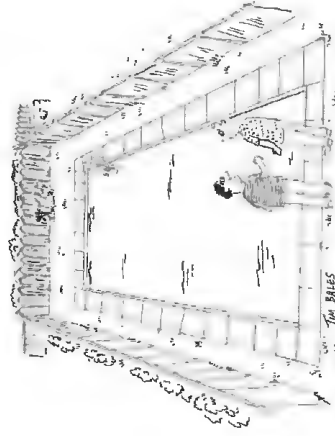
In one sense this novel is the prequel to *This is Memorial Device* that its publisher claims it to be. That book reconstructed the landscape and mindset of the late 1970s post-punk moment in Airdrie, Scotland; superficially, *Industry of Magic & Light* maps the same terrain ten years earlier. Keenan focuses on a small band of hippies in the town running their own light show, plus the bands around the gig scene, before pulling back out to other times and places. The first novel transported us to a Paris apartment and dropped us off there; this time we journey beyond the Iron Curtain and to the far reaches of the hippy trail in Afghanistan. And as one might expect, this being the late 1960s,

The psychedelic experience is evoked in all its metaphysical, Blakean, sanity-threatening intricacy

there is a wide variety of pharmaceuticals involved. But where is this all going, other than Far Out?

It is becoming apparent to this reader – who, as you may already have guessed, has signed up for the whole trip – that what Keenan is attempting with these novels is to evoke the psychedelic experience in all its metaphysical, Blakean, sanity-threatening intricacy. The sequence represents not so much a *roman-fleuve* as a Roman bacchanal, a Dionysian freak-out to the music of time, where enlightenment is pursued via ritual and the 'systemic derangement of the senses'.

To call such an artistic undertaking risky



'I just managed to fill it in time before the ban here kicked in.'

is an understatement. For every Rimbaud adrift in a 'drunken boat', there is a Jim Morrison dead in the bathtub. Commercially it must represent something of a challenge to the publisher too. Paraphrasing Eric Morecambe, Keenan is not going to sell much ice-cream going at that speed. *Industry of Magic & Light* does not perhaps represent the easiest way into this labyrinthine fiction. It can be a challenge to recall when or where one has met a character before; at points I wished I had ingested something enabling me to go back and reread all four previous books very fast. But I love the 'chains of flashing images' that hold everything together here – tunnels, the Tarot, mirrors, things glimpsed and then obscured, only to reappear somewhere else – and the crazily ambitious attempt to catalogue and commemorate the psychedelic experience even as it recedes into history.

Perturbed spirit

Elisa Segrave

Long Shadows

by Abigail Cutter

She Writes Press, £12.99, pp. 344

Long Shadows, a powerful novel set mainly in the American civil war, is very unlike *Gone with the Wind*. The narrator, Tom Smiley, is now an unhappy ghost trapped in his old home, which, apart from snakes, mice and silverfish, has been uninhabited since his widowed daughter Clara died. A young couple arrive: Harry, who has inherited the property, and Phoebe, a psychic. To Tom's indignation, they start renovating, getting rid of loved objects such as his family's kitchen table and piano. Letters, medals and his sisters' clothes are unearthed, prompting painful memories for him.

This is the story of a man from a modest Virginia farming family who were not slave-owners, though Tom is riven with guilt about a past cowardly act, and sometimes about slavery, which he'd hardly considered when he rashly enlisted as a teenager in the Confederate army shortly before his home state seceded from the Union in May 1861.

Abigail Cutter's knowledge of what soldiers and their families endured – smallholders often close to starvation as the Union army marched south – is impressive, as is her skill in bringing these scenes to life. The casual cruelties – and some kindnesses – of both Confederate and Union troops are persuasive. Tom, with his friend Sam, rescues a 'Union' dog from being hanged by drunken Confederate Mississippi boys, but then participates in stoning a man his father's age for being the recipient of a letter from a 'Union' Pennsylvania relative.

The way the combatants try to keep the full horrors of war from their families

at home rings true. A romantic patriotic poem – ‘His noble heart is now at rest; the young, the beautiful, the grave’ – on a soldier’s coffin contrasts with graphic scenes in the wheat fields and peach orchards around Gettysburg, where ‘Confederate bodies sprawled across boulders and twisted in the grass.’ The beady, informative letters from Tom’s younger sibling, signed ‘Your loyal sister, Mary’, are very moving. He had kept every one.

Personally, I would have got a priest to exorcise the house. Tom, as poltergeist, moves Harry’s heavy toolbox several feet across the floor, alarming Phoebe. She summons a neuroscience professor, who urges her to help Tom, not fear him, and to understand the tragedy of his transformation from eager innocent boy to broken man. Tom’s experiences, so vividly described, highlight the futility, chaos and hopelessness of war. *Long Shadows* is a deep and thought-provoking novel.

Adrift in Berlin Mika Ross-Southall

Sojourn

by Amit Chaudhuri
Faber, £14.99, pp. 144

Feelings of dislocation are at the heart of Amit Chaudhuri’s award-winning novels. *Friend of My Youth* (2017) followed a writer’s unsettling trip back to his childhood home in Bombay. Before that, *Odysseus Abroad* (2014) charted the day of a lonely English literature student from India as he meandered around London. Now, in *Sojourn* – Chaudhuri’s eighth novel – we meet a nameless first-person narrator adrift in Berlin.

It is the early 2000s, and the 43-year-old, Indian protagonist has just arrived as a visiting professor at a university for four months. He doesn’t know anyone, and navigating the streets is confusing. After giving his inaugural talk, he is accosted by Faqul, a ‘furtive’, ‘entertaining’ poet kicked out of Bangladesh for insulting the Prophet Mohammed. Faqul phones him the next day, and almost every day after that. He acts as a kind of tour guide, taking the narrator to Peek & Cloppenburg to buy new clothes, pointing out sex shops and bullet holes on the sides of buildings. But the more the narrator sees, the more he becomes untethered from reality.

Chaudhuri is masterful at showing the effect Berlin has on the narrator. The city is ‘part graveyard, part playground’, filled with dark memories ‘reported to you. They sink in’. His neighbourhood borders the ‘frozen beauty’ of Grunewald forest, from where “they sent Jews to the camps,” [Faqul] said, lighting a cigarette’. He is drawn to things that transcend nationality: German words that

sound ‘exactly like Bengali’, and an Indian song playing on the radio by a fruit vendor in the U-Bahn station. It’s all the more poignant, then, that the narrator experiences several moments of racism. ‘They think you live in a hut, where you come from,’ an acquaintance tells him. ‘They think: this is good enough for him!’

Dryness and prosaic charm often punctuate the narrator’s inner voice. A rice pudding at a Turkish restaurant tastes ‘not pleasant or unpleasant’. He describes the toilet in his new flat at length, with the ironised intonation of an Airbnb review: ‘It was mostly a slab, like a dissection table... I couldn’t bear to sit on it for very long. It stained easily because of the shape, and I started cleaning it as soon as I began using it.’

At other times – for example, when the narrator is at the house of a woman he’s attracted to – Chaudhuri withholds information, imbuing the scene with a clever emotional authenticity, rather than telling us exactly what’s going on: ‘I see myself

The Crossing

The lone stag’s crossing a field.

He’s done with rutting.

Outside Snape Makings

he listens to Alexander Gadjiev.

He’s got Chopin in his head.

He misses the girls.

He’s missing an antler.

The sky is blood-red.

The sonata was perfect.

He’s always had a thing about New York.

He slips into the water at Bawdsey.

His wounds are cauterised.

He’s swimming to Old Felixstowe.

He curls up in the bowels of the ship like Rimbaud.

He’s not sure how things will go.

The stowaway stag.

He’s going to start again.

He’d like some music.

He’d like to play the cello.

He’d really like a cigar.

– Julian Stannard

in the bedroom’s pink glow. I see her pale body in the mirror.’

This unassuming, elliptical style is pulled off less convincingly towards the end during a forced and foggy sequence that doesn’t make much sense. Nevertheless, we are absorbed by the 130 pages of text and its invitation to read between the lines. Halfway through, the narrator watches re-runs of *Heimat* on television in the evening alone, even though he doesn’t understand what the characters are saying.

I stayed with the inexplicable images, of people drinking beer in the sun, of movement inside rooms, interminable conversations. I didn’t know which year it was – there was no ostensible period detail; everything was humdrum ‘normal’.

It sums up what Chaudhuri tries to achieve with this book: grand, nondescript, recognisable glimpses of a person’s life.

The best of the bunch Scott Bradfield

Speaking of Harpo

by Susan Fleming Marx and Robert S. Bader
Applause, £25, pp.256

It’s hard (if not impossible) to imagine a world worth living in that doesn’t include the Marx Brothers; and equally impossible to imagine the Marx Brothers without their forever silent, animal-loving, hilariously unpredictable Harpo, he of the moppet wig, trampish overcoat packed with stolen silverware and blow torches, and recurrently grotesque facial expressions. For while the greatest comic performers of the silent film era (such as Chaplin and Keaton) couldn’t speak to the camera, Harpo was the only comic of the talkie era who simply wouldn’t, as if human conversation were somehow beneath him.

There was always something about Harpo that seemed a little better than the ridiculous world he inhabited, as if he spiritually resided way out beyond the stratospheric clouds of absurdity. As Joe Adamson wrote in 1973, when the Marx Brothers films were being enthusiastically rediscovered on college campuses and film repertory movie screens: ‘Harpo’s actions bespeak an ethereal freedom that is immediately recognisable as something we know nothing about.’ Which is probably why so many of us enjoy him.

The second of five sons born in Manhattan to Jewish immigrants – the legendary stage mom Minnie and her husband Sam, a poor excuse for a tailor and a great excuse for a family chef, known as ‘Frenchie’ – Adolph (Harpo) Marx enjoyed what he happily recalled as an impoverished life, one in which he roamed the streets selling stolen items at pawn brokers, or doing chores for nickels. He quickly learned to be happy



Harpo Marx in *Horse Feathers* (1932)

with what little he possessed while he had it, since his ne'er-do-well older brother Joseph (known as Chico, as in 'he's off chasing another chick, oh') would almost instantly steal it, sell it and use the money to gamble himself further into debt.

All five of the brothers eventually followed their uncle Al Shean into vaudeville, singing, dancing and engaging in comic skits that often played off the motley urban accents of their neighbourhoods – Irish, Italian, Yiddish and German. They formed a fairly successful singing group called the Five Nightingales, and by their thirties developed the characters that would make them famous for the rest of their lives: Groucho, of the painted on moustache and diamond-sharp insults; Chico, of the Italian malapropisms and finger-pistol piano playing; and possibly greatest of all, that wildly smiling imp of the perverse who never

spoke and never needed to, since he could easily express his deepest emotions through playing either an angelic harp or a lasciviously beeping car horn.

Harpo's was a weird, kinetic intelligence which made him seem like either a genius or an idiot savant. At one point, early in

Unlike his brothers, Harpo didn't have a cruel or selfish streak in his nature

his stage career, he was given a harp by his mother to bring more musical variety to their act. Within months, Harpo taught himself to play it, and continued teaching himself instruments throughout his life, including the piano, clarinet and harmonica. When accomplished harpists came over to show him a few things, they were soon dispatched with

notebooks full of idiosyncratic new techniques they never lived long enough to master. 'Harpo was the solid man in the family,' Groucho recalled in *Groucho and Me* (1954). 'He inherited all of my mother's good qualities – kindness, understanding and friendliness. I inherited what was left.'

Unlike his brothers, Harpo didn't have a cruel or selfish streak in his nature; and he was usually recalled with great fondness by everyone who knew him. It comes as no surprise then that this loving, gentle, unpretentious and long-unpublished memoir by his wife of nearly 40 years, *Speaking of Harpo*, lacks any of the bitterness and recriminations of the usual 'tell all' Hollywood autobiography.

When Susan Fleming moved to Hollywood in 1929 to work through the Depression in a series of increasingly minor film roles, she met Harpo at a dinner party given

by Samuel Goldwyn and began one of Hollywood's happiest, longest engagements. While Harpo was more than twice her age, he usually managed to act half as old, and over the next several years he remained committed to his bachelor existence at the notorious Garden of Allah Hotel, where he endlessly partied with the likes of Alexander Woolcott, Robert Benchley, H.G. Wells, F. Scott Fitzgerald, George Bernard Shaw and Dorothy Parker. (It is one of the many happy ironies of Harpo's life that a man known for speaking not a single line of dialogue kept a seat at the Algonquin Round Table – largely, he claimed, as audience rather than participant.)

Unlike Chico, Harpo soon gave up drinking and womanising; and eventually he and Susan went off to be married by a fire station chief in Orange County. (They kept it a secret from the studios for many weeks.) They went on to adopt four children, build a large home in Riverside County (El Rancho Harpo) which often looked like a huge playground, and decided to live without servants. Instead, Susan learned to cook and sort out the finances while Harpo went off on occasional team tours with the always money-strapped Chico. When he was home Susan often found him in the middle of the night playing jacks with their daughter on the bathroom floor, or rushing back in the afternoon to listen to *Uncle Whooa Bill*, a children's daily radio show, with their five-year-old son.

In fact, these radio programmes resulted in one of this book's few regretful memories: Susan's failure to pick up on Harpo's hints that he wanted her to alert the producers about his birthday, so Uncle Whooa Bill could announce a treasure hunt for him, as he did for his child listeners. 'That show was so moronic,' Susan explained many years later to her critical son, 'I couldn't imagine even your crazy father listening to it.' But she never forgave herself.

Speaking of Harpo is an almost relentlessly cheerful book about a happy marriage, and there's hardly much that seems scandalous or surprising about it – with the possible exception of an anecdote about Marlene Dietrich sitting on a tennis court bench, removing her panties and performing a series of *Basic Instinct* leg crosses during a match. Otherwise, the only vituperation Susan expresses is almost exclusively reserved for Harpo's brothers. The endlessly dissolute Chico once embarrassed his daughter by hitting on one of her teenage friends at a high school function, while Groucho liked to save his cruellest insults not for the contestants on *You Bet Your Life* but for his three wives. (None of them were 'long-suffering', though, since they each soon divorced him.)

In our cynical times – especially regarding Hollywood celebrities – this is a delightful read. Susan originally wrote it in

response to taking a creative writing course in the early 1980s, and later collaborated on revisions with Robert S. Bader, who had previously worked with Harpo on his naturalistic, verbally effusive memoir, *Harpo Speaks* (1961). Then, after Susan lost interest in the project (she is clearly not a self-aggrandising personality – another quality that makes this book refreshing), and her death in 2002, the manuscript gathered dust until Bader recovered it, rewrote passages and finally released the completed book.

Susan would find her husband playing jacks with their daughter in the middle of the night on the bathroom floor

his always opened 'My deare harte' – which discussed in detail the tactics and strategies of the war. Never ones to miss a PR opportunity, the Parliamentary high command ordered that a selection should be published with a guiding commentary. The first editorial note got straight to the point:

It is plain, here, first, that the Kings Counsels are wholly governed by the Queen... Though she be of the weaker sex, borne an alien, bred up in a contrary religion, yet nothing great or small is transacted without her privy and consent.

It was the start of a powerful narrative that cast the French-born queen as the king's evil adviser.

That she might ever be characterised as a Stuart-era Lady Macbeth would have amazed the bevy of courtiers and hangers-on who had accompanied Henrietta Maria to England on her arrival as the wife of the English king 20 years earlier. Childlike in physique and just 15, she was mignon and looked, according to Leanda Lisle's sympathetic biography, 'like a 17th-century Audrey Hepburn'.

Naïve and spoilt she might have been, but her lineage was mighty, her names those of her formidable parents, Henri IV of France – the erstwhile Henri of Navarre who had abandoned his Protestant faith to bag the crown of France – and Marie de Medici, the imperious daughter of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Both had lived through the turmoil of religious war in the aftermath of the schism of the Reformation. That there was trouble ahead for their daughter should have been obvious when, in the proxy marriage ceremony, the Protestant groom's representative couldn't even enter Notre-Dame de Paris where it took place.

Arriving in England, Henrietta Maria found herself out in the cold. Her shy and awkward husband was in deep thrall to the charismatic and controlling Duke of Buckingham, and set out on a series of half-baked military interventions in Europe that each ended in disaster. Tears and tantrums followed. The misery would be abated by an obscure assassin, who thrust a blade into the duke's torso in a pub in Portsmouth, thereby creating a vacancy for a royal favourite – into which Henrietta Maria neatly stepped.

With the role, as everyone from Piers Gaveston to Anne Boleyn had found, came unpopularity. But she was largely oblivious to it, and the 1630s would be a time of happiness and harmony for the royal couple. Charles had decided to do without parliament, and he and his wife occupied themselves buying paintings by Rubens and Van Dyck, dancing at court masques designed by Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson, and producing children with joyful regularity.

The fun could not last. Charles I's terrible political judgment was a character flaw that had developed long before he became close to his wife. But in his love for her he

The French scapegoat

Anna Keay

Henrietta Maria: Conspirator, Warrior, Phoenix Queen

by Leanda de Lisle

Chatto & Windus, £25, pp. 342

On 15 June 1645, as Thomas Fairfax's soldiers picked over the scattered debris on the Naseby battlefield, they made a sensational discovery. Amid the corpses and musket balls, dismembered limbs and severed swords there nestled a carrying case of personal letters and papers. It was nothing less than the king's private correspondence. The cache included letters between Charles I and his queen, Henrietta Maria –





One of many portraits of Henrietta Maria by Anthony van Dyck

allowed her Catholic chapels at St James's Palace and Somerset House to become ever more visible and vibrant – dangerous in an rabidly anti-Catholic country nursing a grudge against its king.

When the British Isles dissolved into civil war, Henrietta Maria came into her own. She had cut her teeth on the Anglo-

Aged 15, with a childlike physique, Henrietta Maria resembled 'a 17th-century Audrey Hepburn'

French court intrigues of the era of Cardinal Richelieu, with which Alexandre Dumas would have fun two centuries later. But the existential crisis of the war brought out in her a new seriousness and strength of character. She travelled to the continent to raise funds, narrowly avoided capture and injury on numerous occasions and acted with courage and intelligence throughout.

Indeed, the revolutionary years were an epoch of formidable females, the cast of other viragos including Lady Brilliana Harley, Charlotte, Countess of Derby, Anne Fairfax and Anne Monck. After her husband's execution, the exiled Henrietta Maria, back in her native Paris, became bitter, and her capacity for compromise withered. Her brutal rejection of her youngest son when he upheld his father's dying instruction to remain faithful to the Protestant faith is a hard task for even the most approving biographer to excuse.

Henrietta Maria's remarkable life is recounted with gusto in this sharp, sparky book. While it does not claim to cut new historical turf, it makes vivid use of recent work on her court and queenship, brings people and personalities to the fore and will be a particular delight to those new to the period. Few consorts of any age so vividly exposed the old lie that women were 'the weaker sex'.

Nasty, brutish and short Marcus Newitt

A Murderous Midsummer: The Western Rising of 1549

by Mark Stoyke
Yale, £25, pp. 336

As Tory writers reflected on the safe passage of the Stuart dynasty through the Exclusion Crisis of 1679-81, an anonymous author urged contemporaries to learn the lessons of English history. *The Rebels Doom* (1684) offered some thumbnail sketches of various unsuccessful rebellions and attempted revolutions that had threatened the monarchy since the reign of Edward the Confessor, in order to show 'the Fatal Consequences that have always attended ... Disloyal Violations of Allegiance'.

The writer paused especially over one Tudor insurrection from 1549, in which

10,000 rebels from Devon and Cornwall took up arms against the administration of Edward VI and besieged the city of Exeter, but were ultimately crushed by forces led by Lord John Russell. For the anonymous writer the episode was clearly of national rather than regional or West Country importance; when the ringleaders of the revolt were 'splendidly hanged', their bodies offered his own 'Wavering Age ... [an] Admonition to the Restless and Impatient' who sought to 'spurn the Lawful authority of their Sovereign prince'.

This admonitory event in Tudor history, known as the Prayer Book Rebellion or, less pejoratively, the Western Rising, is the subject of Mark Stoyale's authoritative new book. Like the author of *The Rebels Doom*, Stoyale claims national significance for the events of midsummer 1549, showing how a series of parish-level protests, resisting the imposition of the Book of Common Prayer that began in the Devonshire village of Stampton Court, swiftly became an insurrection that gravely imperilled the regime of Edward VI and ultimately contributed to the toppling of Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, as Lord Protector and head of the child king's administration.

In meticulous detail, Stoyale demonstrates how the official forces of English Protestantism ruthlessly triumphed over groups of West Country men and women from all points on the social scale. Led by two of Cornwall's wealthiest men, Humphrey Arundell and John Winslade, as well as another rebel captain with the inauspicious surname Coffin, this was no thoughtless artisanal rebellion – despite the attempts of contemporary detractors to paint it thus – but a broad-based, strategic and carefully articulated rejection of the ways in which Protestantism was being imposed on communities still fiercely committed to the Roman Catholic faith.

By depicting the tenacious regional loyalty to traditional religion, Stoyale's book issues a reminder that the Reformation, even in its earliest years, was never the wholesale done deal that its Tudor ideologues maintained. The West Country insurgents' demands centred on doctrinal or religious matters – the reaffirmation of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the reinstitution of weekday baptism for children, the withdrawal of the new service book – rather than the economic concerns, such as enclosure or land reform, which animated the orchestrators of Ket's Rebellion, suppressed in Norfolk in the same year.

There was a regional and linguistic dimension to the rebels' grievances, too. The imposition of Protestantism in the form of a new English prayer book and liturgy was especially inflammatory in west Cornwall, where a significant proportion of the populace did not even speak the language.

Thus, some of the most memorable pas-

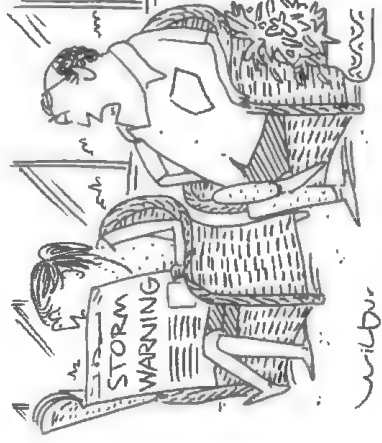
sages in Stoyale's study demonstrate that the Reformation was never secured by the light, logic and beauty of vernacular scripture alone, but was always accompanied by terrifying, programmatic state-sanctioned violence and intimidation. Between 14 and 27 priests, only some of whom were rebel combatants, were killed by the authorities in their suppression of the Western Rising, their corpses hung up in chains from church towers, market crosses and gallows as community reminders of the powers of the new faith and the evangelical state.

Once the uprising was quashed, with at least 2,000 rebels dead, according to a conservative contemporary estimate, some West Country churchmen who were suspected of sympathising with those executed were 'given' to local Protestant grandees and forced to pay punitive ransoms for their lives and property. This practice extended beyond the clergy, and those who refused to pay such ransoms faced torture for their support of the rebellion. Such was the case of a septuagenarian called Thomas Ennys who, wrongly

The corpses of priests were hung up in chains from church towers, market crosses and gallows

suspected of being a rebel, had ropes twisted and tightened around his ears and genitals until he agreed to give a local loyalist everything he possessed.

Stoyale's arguments are always well evidenced and carefully weighed and, ultimately, nuance and enrich familiar narratives of the Western Rising rather than overturn them. For instance, one of his central claims is that the Cornish insurgency began a month later than traditionally argued, on 6 July rather than 6 June. This seemingly negligible shortening of the rebellious midsummer by just four weeks actually enables us to appreciate how the insurgency would have appeared particularly sudden, menacing and purposeful to the regime, and helps explain why the authorities reacted with such uncompromising force.



'Meteorological, political, military or financial?'

A sentimental journey

Nikhil Krishnan

Looking for Theophrastus: Travels in Search of a Lost Philosopher

by Laura Beatty

Atlantic, £16.99, pp.352

Publishers lately seem to have got the idea that otherwise uncommercial subjects might be rendered sexy if presented with a personal, often confessional, counterpoint. The ostensible subject of Laura Beatty's book is the pioneering Greek botanist and philosopher Theophrastus. He was a friend of Aristotle's, and was once thought his intellectual equal, but is now little known except to a few classicists and historians of science. But since no one wants to publish a straight book on Theophrastus, we get instead a book that is at least as much about Laura Beatty, her library researches, her travels in Greece and her kitchen garden.

Her publishers describe the book as 'genre-defying'. But the genre lines can be blurred only so often before we have simply created a new genre, with all the clichés that come with it: how *Middlemarch* cured my midlife crisis, retracing Nietzsche's morning walks, what Mrs Gaskell taught me about love... you know the sort of thing. Works in this genre have rarely managed to answer the basic sceptical question they raise: if I'm not already interested enough in Theophrastus to pick up a book about him, why would I be any likelier to pick up a book on him because it also features the sentimental journeys of a certain Laura Beatty?

Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage* remains a model of how to do it, if you must. The memoir there really earned its keep, with D.H. Lawrence's personality brought into sharp relief when evoked in the voice of its crotchety, distractible narrator. Dyer solved the problem of how to draw in the Lawrence sceptics by being provocative, perceptive and extremely funny. Would that his imitators had learnt that lesson.

To be clear, Beatty's book is not by any means the worst entry in this genre. The passages of travelogue are relatively brief, the Paddy Leigh Fermor flourishes kept firmly under control. She is an earnest and persuasive champion of a minor Theophrastian work, *The Characters*, which she praises for its novelistic insight into human psychological types. She quotes intelligently and often at length from Theophrastus himself, allowing us to watch him grapple with the foundational problems of a science in its infancy. How to classify, without distorting, the bewildering variety of nature? Should we go by form or function, appearance or inner structure, behaviour or habitat? How to distinguish folk superstition from canny proto-scientific explanation?

'Imagine a world,' she instructs us,



*The real-life crime writer Josephine Tey returns as a central character in **Dear Little Corpses**, the latest in Nicola Upson's series*

something that a fast-paced plot should not indulge in. At its best, however, cosy crime can do this very well. Nicola Upson certainly succeeds in *Dear Little Corpses* (Faber, £14.99), the latest in a series featuring the real-life mystery writer Josephine Tey.

When war is declared in 1939, the mass evacuation of urban children ensues, including some sent from London to the small Suffolk village where Tey lives with her partner Marta, an actress. When a local girl goes missing, panic strikes the village, already deeply unsettled by the arrival of the London refugees. Archie Penrose, the regular detective involved in these mysteries, appears on the scene, and together he and Tey help hunt for the missing child, with some assistance from the great figure of detective fiction's Golden Age, Margery Allingham.

By setting the tale in 1939, the author allows a vivid depiction of the anxiety caused by the prospect of war without the story getting overwhelmed by the conflict itself. And the more we learn about the village's inhabitants, the darker the tale becomes. The writing is often powerfully nuanced: a mother's heartbreak as she dispatches her little girl to stay with strangers is especially well portrayed, capturing feelings – the mother's fearful uncertainty as to whether

her daughter will be safer after all; the girl's baffled hurt that the mother who loves her is sending her away – without any of the verbal billboards used by lesser writers. There do appear to be an awful lot of depraved weirdos for one small village, and the many twists towards the end start to seem relentless.

The furore escalates when an archivist is found stabbed to death with a pair of secateurs in the village church

less, but the writing is first-rate, the historical background resonant but not intrusive, and as Upson heads for the next title in her Tey series, her imagination and prose show no signs of flagging.

Sadly, this is not the case with *To Kill a Troubadour* (Quercus, £20), the 15th volume in Martin Walker's Dordogne-set series featuring his French chief of police Bruno Courrèges. As always, the author lovingly depicts daily life in the fictional village of St Denis; he has made the Dordogne as much his own as Peter Mayle did Provence. The novel's plot is refreshingly straightforward. A Catalan group, pro-independence, is scheduled to give an outdoor concert when a specialist sniper's bullet is discovered. An

assassination seems planned and the Spanish government suggests that right-wing extremists may be plotting to kill the singer in the group. Naturally, Bruno is called in, along with a host of special forces and counter-terrorist officials, including his old love Isabelle Perrault, now relocated in Paris.

Throughout, we learn about many of the meals Bruno prepares and the ingredients he favours – for gazpacho and for the dry rub for roasting lamb. Then there is the breakfast for the Special Forces (eggs, pâté, tomato to salad) and a most un-French Coronation Chicken. The food is all there but the actual relish for it is not. There are also long disquisitions on Occitan culture and history which badly slow the story without generating much compensatory interest.

When some action finally takes place, it is well described, even gripping, but there is far too little of it and comes much too late. Newcomers to the series would benefit from starting with the earlier books. This latest is not perfunctory so much as mechanical: the elements are mainly there, but one senses a flagging authorial enthusiasm. Enough so to think it might be good for Walker to take a break and perhaps write a cookbook next – but the acknowledgements page has got there first: 'A composite volume of the Bruno cookbook is to be published in English in 2022.'

If your saccharine tolerance gets saturated by these ventures into cosy crime, antidotes are available, and among recent thrillers, Stephanie Merritt's *Storm* stands out (HarperCollins, £14.99). A charismatic, ultimately demonic young woman named Storm infiltrates a reunion of friends on holiday in France. She is bent on revenge for historical, deeply buried wrongs. The interplay among the old friends – their attachments, their resentments – is distinctive and nicely set against the disruptive newcomer. The pace is beautifully varied, despite the book's 400 pages. A first-rate read by a very skilled writer.

Much more unusual – indeed unlike anything you will have read – is *A Certain Hunger* (Faber, £8.99), the debut of Chelsea G. Summers. It's the fictional 'memoir' of a homicidal female psychopath, told in the first person, and will be distasteful to many, being chock-full of highly explicit sex and extreme violence. The story is recounted jauntily by Dorothy Daniels, who details the savagery that has landed her in prison for life. A food writer of some renown, unsurprising given the relish with which she butchers and occasionally even eats her male victims, Daniels makes Moll Flanders seem like Alice Liddell. But her voice is consummately honed – articulate, sarcastic and often very funny – and the writing throughout is stunningly good. Though the novel's grotesquerie will deter many and unsettle even those who perceive, if you value prose over probity, this one is for you.

Falling stars

If you want real acting in films, forget the leads – it's in the supporting roles that you'll find true talent, says *Tanya Gold*

The star system is a false hierarchy: the best rarely make it to the top. I thought of this recently when it was announced that David Warner had died. Few outside acting could name him, though you may have seen his head flying off in *The Omen*, a film in which heads are cheap. Warner was a Manchester-born jobbing actor: a character actor, better defined by what he is not, which was a star.

I could write pages about why a star is a star, and a character actor remains a character actor, but the most significant reason is simple. Warner was brilliant but he was not handsome. Yet he did, in *Time Bandidas*, a tale of little people thieving through history with a magic map, steal a film not only from Sean Connery – playing King Agamemnon with an Edinburgh accent, which surprisingly does work – and Ian Holm, a notorious film-stealer himself, but also from Ralph Richardson, as a peculiarly British God: God the weary bureaucrat.

Warner played Evil as a pantomime dame with curling nails, locked in a mirrored fortress with his ambition and his fury. I'm faintly surprised he isn't standing for leader of the Conservative party because he'd win. He met the part with ecstasy: at one point he transformed himself into a carousel. Nothing I saw in the cinema in my childhood matched him and when he died, I mourned the films he could have made.

Hollywood has always been a star factory, and, a century in, little has changed on the production line. It likes a kind of glowing perfection in women, as if they are designed to be lit, not touched: Natalie Portman and Scarlett Johansson are living statues. Lana Turner and Ava Gardner, luminous but not actors – though Gardner broke free at last in *Night of the Iguana* – were sent to star

school, to learn not to stare down the lens.

This was parodied in *A Star is Born*: Esther Blodgett (Judy Garland) was turned into a painted hag by the star factory and the film bombed for being unbelievable. Better actors – Agnes Moorehead, who had the best moment in *Citizen Kane* with one word ('Charles!') and Joan Greenwood of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* – were denied stardom. They were too interesting. There are exceptions of course, and they flare through luck or a brief change in fashion. Film noir, for instance, was kind to real actors, and Marilyn Monroe is, whatever she looked like, the greatest comedienne in cinema. Bette Davis's

Hollywood always regresses to its hunger for simple flesh. Leading men must have a meaty quality

flashing eyes and Judy Garland's voice could never be gainsaid and attempts to monetise the 1960s counterculture allowed a weirder leading man to flourish: Jack Nicholson.

But Hollywood always regresses to its hunger for simple flesh. Leading men must have a meaty quality. Clark Gable begat Burt Lancaster begat George Clooney begat Chris Pratt. They are not great actors and watching them try to be is painful: they can't be. Do they know it? A great actor needs ambivalence. Cary Grant had it and hid it – hence his fame. Paul Scofield couldn't repress it; Tom Hollander and Roger Allam still have it. They quake with it: with words denied. A great star has the opposite of ambivalence: a horrid certainty. He is essentially a talking brick, anchoring the film to this world. Gene Kelly was a singing brick. Brad Pitt is a topless brick. Tom Cruise is a brick that does its own stunts. Paul New-

man in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is called Brick.

If it's a performance you seek, look at the edges, where it is allowed and – if you care about cinema at all – necessary, because it is all you will get. *Casablanca* is the best example. It's a masterpiece but not because of its leads: two-parts absence to one-part Humphrey Bogart (a suave brick). Paul Henreid, as Victor Laszlo, was the world's most boring freedom-fighter, and I have always wondered how Ilse (Ingrid Bergman), who wore only white, managed to launder her clothes in Casablanca. Isn't she supposed to be a refugee? But that's all I wondered. What else was there to ask a woman whose job is to be laundered while confused?

The film, rather, belongs to the supporting cast, who toss it between themselves joyfully: Peter Lorre, the criminal; Conrad Veidt, the Nazi; Leonid Kinskey, the Russian; Madeleine Lebeau, the slut, having the smallest drunken tantrum to merit a taxi home in the whole of cinema; S.Z. Sakall, the waiter; Claude Rains and Sydney Greenstreet, the lotus eaters.

Still, there are games to be had if you accept the premise: supporting actors tend to out-perform leads. Wilfrid Hyde-White was better than Rex Harrison or Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*. Marni Nixon – singing the voice of Eliza Doolittle, and Mrs Anna in *The King and I* – was better than all of them. Bernard Hill, whom I once saw sitting grumpily on the London Underground, was the best thing in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as King Théoden of Rohan, leaking pathos the way I imagine Treebeard leaked sap.

Ian McShane stole the remnants of the *John Wick* franchise from Keanu Reeves, even if they clearly cast McShane because they couldn't afford Al Pacino. I'm not entirely sure McShane is a great



A film that belongs to the supporting cast, who toss it between themselves joyfully:
Peter Lorre as Signor Ugarte in *Casablanca* (1942)

actor, but he's a lot better than Reeves.

Sometimes there is justice, but not often enough, when the character actor is merely resting on his way to star status. I am mesmerised by Philip Seymour Hoffman as a tornado expert in *Twister*, a film so empty that a vacuum is literally its antagonist. Later he stole *The Talented Mr Ripley* from Jude Law (a pretty brick), became the best leading man of his generation, and died.

Sometimes the ambivalent do reach the top of the marquee: see Adam Driver using The Force to have Dark Side Sex with Daisy Ridley – another collection of surfaces – in *Star*

Wars 9. Alan Rickman did it too in *Die Hard* and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, where he kicked the action heroes Bruce Willis and Kevin Costner where it hurts: in the performance. John Malkovich is the same. He's

John Malkovich is too interesting to be a leading man, but when he's on screen you can't see anything else

too interesting – and much too ugly – to be a leading man, but when he is on screen you can't see anything else. Then there is Ben-

edict Cumberbatch. It happens perhaps once in a generation. It should happen more often.

As evidence I mention another performance that obsesses me. It is in *Prime Suspect 4*, and for me it is the best scene in television. It is Jane Tennison (Helen Mirren) interviewing a serial killer's mother called Doris Marlow. The woman had dementia, and remembers, for Tennison, the night trauma turned her son into a murderer. I've never seen a better performance and it was over in moments. The actor was Joyce Olivia Redman, she was 80 when she played Doris Marlow, and she died in 2012.



Couple in Bed, 1977, by Philip Guston

Exhibitions

We get the picture Joshua Lieberman

Philip Guston Now

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
until 11 September

Philip Guston is hard to dislike. The most damning critique levied against the canonical mid-century American painter is that he is too uncontroversial, his appeal too broad, his approach altogether too winsome. None of that stopped the team behind *Philip Guston Now* – a travelling mega-survey of his work, which will reach Tate Modern in 2023 – from announcing otherwise. In 2020, the year the show was due to open, the curators announced that in light of the ‘racial justice movement’, the artist’s works might now legitimately be read as racist, and

the show could not go forward as planned. This was and is quite obviously nonsense. The works in question are marshmallow-like renderings of Klansmen in absurd, mundane scenes. The KKK were a preoccupation for Guston, himself a Jew and target of the Klan. The team decided to bring in ‘more diverse voices... that allow us to appreciate the con-

The sole principle guiding the show seems to be contempt for Guston

text in which Guston worked’, as though it were a year-long screening of *Triumph of the Will*. ‘That process will take time.’ Initially quoting four years to heroically save the artist’s works from themselves, by some miracle, they managed to do it in just two. The show contains 100 works.

I was cautiously optimistic that sense had prevailed when I learned the show

was finally opening. I shouldn’t have been.

Perhaps the most embarrassing misjudgment of the exhibition occurs before you enter the gallery. You are given a copy of ‘Emotional Preparedness for *Philip Guston Now*’, a mawkish, overwrought trigger warning seemingly designed to offend and confuse anyone familiar with Guston’s work, and dissuade anyone unfamiliar from looking at it. The team hired Ginger Klee, a therapist who specialises in ‘acculturative stress’ of the ‘BIPOC and/or LGBTQIAPD+’ and ‘fat’ communities, who has no apparent knowledge of art, to write this sermon. As with all great texts of the genre, it starts by bestowing rights: ‘To feel your feelings... as a person of color or not.’ Thanks? Our guide continues: ‘My advice to you on this complex journey is to embrace that guilt and the journey... I encourage you to lean into the discomfort of this work and remind you that... we also must prioritise rest.’

The sole principle guiding the show

seems to be a contempt for Guston. The hang is scattered and sloppy. It unifyingly blends together Guston's juvenilia (mostly politically overt, second-rate surrealism) with much more developed work from later in his career. As his formative work is neither notable nor flattering, it is odd to find so much of it in the show. The curators shamefully use some of his later small pieces – regarded as among his most important – as decorative space-fillers, hanging them in such a way that they're barely in view, never mind clearly labelled or interpreted.

They have vitrines with sliding tops to hide some objects, including a newspaper clipping about a very early piece he made condemning the Klan, which was vandalised by them. The work is not significant, except that its destruction is likely what spurred Guston's later paintings that subvert the menace of the Klan with humour. The only other instance I can think of where artists were simultaneously exhibited, physically censored, and verbally chastised is the Nazi's *Degenerate Art* show in 1937.

Without fanfare, or indeed preparedness, a three-projector montage shows the Kent State shootings, US aircraft napalming bombing Vietnam and close-ups of Richard

They have installed an emergency exit in case visitors need immediate safety from the paintings

Nixon in a vestibule. It was an odd way to let us know we have moved from the 1930s to the cusp of 1970. Odder still, a portentous text alerts us to the fact that they have taken the precaution of installing an emergency exit in case visitors need immediate safety from the paintings in the next room. Extra copies of Ms Klee's tract are available.

The real and primary offence of this next room is that it is amateurishly over-hung. It brims with some of Guston's best work, including three large paintings of the farcical hooded men. In the middle of the room is a cheap re-staging of his most famous work, 'The Studio', showing a Klansman risibly painting a self-portrait and smoking. A video speculating about hidden Klansmen in his non-Klansman work plays in the education suite, where a wall text goes some way to explain the dereliction of the show: 'Despite the art world telling us that Guston mattered – to us, it felt the opposite.'

The tragedy of *Philip Guston Now* is that they've managed to include all the dreadful trappings of Now and almost no Philip Guston.

The exhibition is at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston from 23 October to 15 January 2023, the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC from 26 February 2023 to 27 August 2023 and at Tate Modern from 3 October 2023 to 4 February 2024.

Opera Joyous freefall Richard Bratby

Candide

New Rotterdam Wharf, Glasgow, until 20 August

HMS Pinafore

Opera Holland Park

The first part of the adventure was getting there. Out of the subway, past the tower blocks and under the motorway flyover. A quick glance at Google Maps and into a patch of litter-blown scrub. Someone bustles up alongside me: 'Are you looking for the opera?' I am, yes; and my guess is that the cluster of clipboard-y types in high-vis tabards next to that warehouse probably marks the entrance. We're waved in: 'Big Cock' proclaims a graffiti-covered wall. There's a stack of shipping containers, an improvised bar (cold beer and Scotch pies) and a big tented space filled with drifting crowds and that apprehensive, slightly unsettled murmur you always hear when – unusually for an opera audience – no one really knows what they've let themselves in for.

A classic Edinburgh Festival experience, you might think: except that Scottish Opera's promenade production of Bernstein's *Candide* is taking place in Glasgow, while the mighty International Festival – barring a visit from Garsington's (admittedly superb) *Rusalka* – seems to have pretty much thrown in its hand this year, at least as regards main-stage opera. Certainly, nothing at Edinburgh looked half as intriguing as this open-air staging by Jack Furness: by a curious coincidence, the director of that stunning *Rusalka* here producing Scotland's operatic event of the summer on the opposite side of the country.

Whatever: *Candide* pulled you in and tipped you out, three hours later, footsore but with all senses fizzing. This site-specific way of doing opera was pioneered by the late Graham Vick's Birmingham Opera Company. For Vick, it was an end in itself, and the atmosphere of ferocious, almost cult-like commitment that made his Birmingham productions feel so transgressive was much less noticeable in Glasgow. But there are other advantages to this way of doing things – creating opera that is mobile, rough-edged and which redefines its focus from moment to moment (though the tightness of the ensemble, even when the singers were a good 20 metres from the orchestra, was striking).

Scottish Opera, like Vick, has recruited a sizeable community company, strengthened by the professional chorus and embedded in the audience, producing an electrifying, immersive thrill as the singing suddenly engulfs you on all sides. In Birmingham, sprawling unstageable problem pieces like Stockhaus-

en's *Mittwoch* and Tippett's *The Ice Break* became cogent and vital when dynamited free from theatrical conventions and allowed to fall into their natural shape. *Candide* – a theatrical car crash with an indestructible score – falls plumb into that category.

And yes – done like this, *Candide* almost works, generating a carnival-like sense of occasion and a joyous, headlong momentum. Furness fired visual gags like chaff as the orchestra (under Stuart Stratford) went full-tilt at Bernstein's score, and the cast leaped from stage to articulated lorry to inflatable boat, clutching cuddly toy sheep while video screens clarified the plot in the language of emojis. There were riot police, chat-show hosts and fornicating priests. A Sturgeon-like 'Minister of Freedom' presided smugly over a public execution and the severed head of Boris Johnson was paraded on a pike. That got cheers, as it would doubtless have done at Glyndebourne, too (it's going to be a lot harder to get quick laughs out of a Truss or a Starmer).

William Morgan was Candide: a wide-eyed man-child, first seen clutching his toy Millennium Falcon, and singing with undimmed freshness as his wounds grew bloodier. Cunegonde (Paula Sides) kicked seven bells out of a pile of designer shop-

The image of the night would have to be Susan Bullock dancing a one-woman tango on a picnic table

ping before Instagramming herself nailing the coloratura in 'Glitter and Be Gay': an upper register like sequins. Ronald Sammi's Dr Pangloss was a jive-talking huckster in a crimson zoot suit, suave without even trying. But the image of the night – and there were plenty to choose from – would have to be the great Susan Bullock channelling Joan Rivers as the Old Lady and dancing a one-woman tango on a picnic table as she drawled and snarled her way through 'I am Easily Assimilated'. Lady, you said it.

At Holland Park, John Savournin's Charles Court Opera production of *HMS Pinafore* applied a coat of dazzle-paint to the old battlewagon but otherwise kept things shipshape and navy fashion: a trim, affectionate staging with an athletic and well-drilled cast throwing the humour into crisp relief. Savournin himself delivered another star turn as Captain Corcoran: he can create an entire comic persona with the lift of an eyebrow, but *Pinafore* shows his handsome mahogany baritone to fine effect, too. It was also a treat to hear Sir Joseph Porter (Richard Burkhard) sung this musically: purring and smarming away. Lucy Schauer (Little Buttercup, as a Wren) and Llio Evans (Josephine) brought more subtlety and sympathy to their roles than is often the case. G&S doesn't always have to be reinvented: a lot can be achieved with skill, imagination, and a dab of spit and polish.



Alan Cumming lip-syncs the voice of Brandon Lee seamlessly in *My Old School*

Cinema

Curiouser and curiouser

Deborah Ross

My Old School

15, Key cities

My Old School is a documentary exploring a true story that would have to be true as it's too preposterous – it is absolutely nuts – for any screenwriter to have made it up.

It's the story of Brandon Lee, who was 16 when he enrolled as a new student to a secondary school in the Glasgow area in 1993. Or is it: was this new boy a 16-year-old called Brandon Lee? And now I'm in a pickle. If I say more it's a spoiler. The film plays its cards close to its chest until the 45-minute mark. You know something is up but not what and if you're coming to it fresh your jaw will hit the floor. But it was a big media story at the time, so many might remember, plus other reviews haven't been at all discreet. It's a dilemma. Tell you what, I'll keep shh but in return you have to promise not to Google it, not even indirectly, as that will deliver in spades. This seems a fair deal.

It is written and directed by Jono McLe-

od, now a filmmaker, who attended the school, Bearsden Academy, at the time, hence *My Old School*. Over the years, he has said, there have been many plans to turn the story into a film but nothing ever happened so it was a case of, OK, I'll do it myself. Lee, as I'll call him, agreed to an interview but with the proviso that he didn't appear on screen so his voice is lip-synced, seamlessly, by Alan Cumming. Elsewhere, McLeod interviews his former teachers and his former classmates as they remember (and also misremember), while flashbacks to their schooldays are shown in jolly, brightly coloured animations voiced by the likes of Clare Grogan and, for some reason, Lulu.

When Brandon Lee arrived at the school in the fifth year everyone clocked him as

You know something is up but not what and if you're coming to it fresh your jaw will hit the floor

weird. He carried a briefcase instead of a backpack. He had big curly hair and an odd accent. He had the same name as the son of Bruce Lee. That is, the Brandon Lee who had been killed on a film set just a couple of months earlier. And he looked strangely

mature, 'like a student teacher', with almost a mask-like countenance, but the way he explained it his mother had been a Canadian opera singer, they'd been involved in a car crash, she had died and he'd survived, so maybe he'd had reconstructive surgery?

Even if you are aware of the story, as I was, you'll still be wondering: how did he fool everybody? How could they *not* know? He could drive a car! He liked Chardonnay! He introduced his classmates to retro music! Plus he was an aspiring medical student who showed genius levels of knowledge in the classroom. But no one questioned any of it, which shows, I think, how easily we take people at face value, and on top of that Lee was brilliant at explaining himself away. You know that in Canada you can get a driving licence at a much younger age than in the UK, right?

Even after the film reveals its central secret there are still many twists and turns: was his hair really that curly? Should he have been recognised? His grandmother: what was going on there? McLeod keeps you in suspense by doling out information bit by bit. There is archival footage – oh Lord, the school production of *South Pacific* in which Lee starred – but it doesn't arrive until quite late in the day so you do have to be patient. (That's what he actually looked like! Finally!) The film is wildly enter-

taining but it's constructed to amuse rather than plumb any significant depths.

There is something tragic and disturbed at the heart of this tale but that is never investigated. Was there a particular trauma? Did Lee have any honest relationships in his life? Has he since? He rose up the school's social hierarchy, became popular and made friends – in particular, Stefan; watch out for him – but does he feel he betrayed them? He is allowed to talk yet never reveals himself. Still, you will enjoy the ride.

Edinburgh Festival

Doctor doctor

Lloyd Evans

Burn

King's Theatre, and touring
until 10 September

Michael Akadiri: No Scrubs

Pleasance Courtyard, until 28 August

Stefania Licari: Medico

Just the Tonic Nucleus, until 28 August

Love, Loss and Chianti

Assembly Rooms, until 28 August

In a new hour-long monologue, *Burn*, Alan Cumming examines the life and work of Robert Burns. The biographical material is drawn from Burns's letters, and the poems are read out in snatches. You won't learn much except that Burns was a poor farmer who later worked as a taxman. To represent his many flings with women, a few high-heeled shoes are dangled on strings above the stage but this looks strangely cheap given that huge sums have been lavished on graphic imagery projected onto a big screen at the rear. Flashing lights and surges of music add to the sense of distraction.

Cumming's performance centres on dance, which looks like a new departure for him. His comic presence, his adroit wit and his impish, teasing face are world-class gifts but this show downplays his strengths. He moves around in slow balletic routines which are difficult to decipher.

And then there's the poetry. Burns's best-known verses are broadcast on a soundtrack which gets tangled up with intrusive musical compositions. Not a great result. The show looks like a four-way race between a poet, an actor, a video artist and a sound engineer. The poet finishes last and the actor comes in a poor third. And the show assumes that Burns holds little interest for the play-goers, who need trippy illuminations and hectic videos to keep them watching.

This is a straightforward black-box show that just needs a performer and a text. Any addition subtracts. Any enlargement dimin-

ishes. And for some reason, Cumming is dressed in a black Lycra T-shirt and matching shorts. He looks like a bicycling mor-tician who follows the Tour de France and discreetly disposes of any contestants who die of an overdose.

No Scrubs is billed as a comic monologue but it feels like a documentary about NHS corruption. The speaker, Dr Michael Akadiri, is a young medic with a limited range of interests: his income, his African heritage and his fear of anal rape. He speaks with a British accent but he dislikes colonialism and he keeps insisting: 'I'm Nigerian.' He became a doctor on the orders of his mother, also an NHS worker, but he doesn't mention healing the sick at all. He confides that he hates caring for ailing passengers on planes because he can't send them a bill.

During lockdown, he says, NHS staff went to supermarkets in medical clothes hoping to get gullible citizens to buy them food. He hated the Thursday night 'Clap for our carers' because it didn't increase his salary. The strangest detail is 'a payment of £82' awarded to NHS workers each time a corpse is sent to the crematorium. 'Ash cash' it's called. Is that a joke? Or do we really bribe health workers to kill us? It sounds likely.

Dr Stefania Licari, in a solo performance, *Medico*, describes the NHS as her personal match-making service. She first mated with a gynaecologist but she was jealous of the women who disrobed for him on his daily rounds. 'I am mono-vaginic,' she said as she jilted him. 'Then she met a thrifty dermatologist who moisturised her skin with marga-

Dr Akadiri confides that he hates caring for ailing passengers on planes because he can't send them a bill

rine. Finally she fell for a plasma delivery man because she found his deep voice sexy.

Dr Licari is blessed with huge reserves of warmth and charm, and her show is a joy to experience. But taxpayers watching these medics will spot a worrying truth. The NHS serves the staff. That's the priority. Patient care is something that happens accidentally, from time to time, while the workers are busy looking after themselves.

Love, Loss and Chianti is tale of middle-aged romance which uses some of the most affected and pretentious language you'll ever encounter. The hero is a poet with a terminally ill wife who recalls their holidays in Crete. He likens monastery bells to 'a jam-session of pots and pans', and he calls a hunt for wild-flowers 'bloom sleuthing'.

After a few minutes you realise that this effortful language is a deliberate effect that carries you away from ordinary speech and into the realm of song. It's inventive, lyrical and strangely gratifying to hear in a theatre where naturalism is the norm. It can be funny too. A cheap pizza is 'a wheel of

gloop-covered dough, sung at the rim'.

Robert Balthurst captures the tragic solitude of a widower who finds himself 'voiceless under the avalanche'. After his wife's funeral, he visits a beloved Soho restaurant which has changed beyond all recognition.

His date for lunch is an old girlfriend whose idiotic husband has become a successful novelist. Will the grieving poet succeed in seducing her? Or will he drink too much Chianti and totter home on his own? To get the full flavour of this fascinating verbal banquet you need to see it twice.

A legend comes to town

Graeme Thomson

Herbie Hancock

Edinburgh Playhouse

Sons of Kemet

Leith Theatre

'Human beings are in trouble these days,' says Herbie Hancock, chatting to us between songs. 'And do you know who can fix it?' 'Herbie!' comes the instant reply, shouted from somewhere in the stalls.

Hancock might be a jazz legend, but he's not quite the Saviour. Kicking off this year's excellent contemporary music programme at the Edinburgh International Festival, he's a hit from the moment he strolls into view. In his long black frockcoat, Hancock has come tonight as the High Priest of Cool. When he straps on a keytar, he's a funky gunslinger. When one of his outstanding trio takes a particularly inventive solo, he cracks up with undisguised glee at the sheer showdown-slaying audacity of their playing.

Hancock's band is sensational, comprising James Genus on electric bass, drummer Justin Tyson and electric guitarist Lionel Loueke, who takes centre stage. Hancock parks himself over to our left, hopping between synthesiser and grand piano, often switching several times during a song.

At 82, he is a living link in the chain of jazz greats. A member of Miles Davis's legendary Second Great Quintet in the 1960s; creator of a series of brilliant Blue Note albums during the same period; jazz-rock fusioner in the 1970s; pop star in the 1980s. Still a tireless innovator into his ninth decade, Hancock needs a box set for every era of his career. Two hours on stage can only offer so much.

As such, the opening 'Overture' turns out to be a kind of crash course in Herbie, a medley moving – only slightly awkwardly – from spacey atmospherics to acoustic piano improvisations to Loueke's impressively scatted guitar and vocal version of Hancock's jazz/funk/pop crossover 'Rockit', which you will remember as the old *Top of the Pops* theme in the 1980s.

That entrée buffet out of the way, it's

time for the more substantive main course. A new arrangement of Wayne Shorter's 'Footprints' is mellow, airy and expansive. 'Actual Proof', plucked from Hancock's funky fusion era, is by contrast busy and glitchy. An urgent morse code piano figure leads into an extended improvisation, solos shared around the band. 'Come Running To Me', a track from his 1978 album *Sunlight*, is eerie and strangely beautiful. Manipulating his unremarkable singing voice with a Vocoder, Hancock multiplies before our ears, the song ending in a chorale of treated harmonies.

This disquietingly smooth future soul from the past feels fresh yet weirdly disembodied from any current reference point. At other moments, the music has more contemporary resonance. The clicking rhythm of 'Footprints' finds a fruitful connection between Miles and Massive Attack. Later, Genus spends several minutes alone on his bass, improvising a series of loops and waves into an extraordinary wash of sound which any post-rock band would covet. Around the edges of 'Secret Sauce', Loueque and Hancock lock into a beautifully off-kilter guitar and piano refrain which recalls the Radiohead of 'Pyramid Song'.

Loueque takes the lead melody on 'Cantaloupe Island', which is closer to the classic 1964 original than the later reggae-tinged reinterpretation. Hancock holds down the lovely loping blues groove before spinning off into a highwire solo. As a crowd-pleasing

encore he performs 'Chameleon', the epically kinetic opening track from the groundbreaking *Head Hunters* album. He prowls the apron of the stage stabbing at his keytar, exhorting the crowd to get up and dance. Hancock is no slouch as a showman but for all that, it's clear that pushing the boundaries of his music still comes first.

A week later, at Leith Theatre, British jazz quartet Sons of Kemet go considerably further in bringing the new stuff to the EIF. Led by saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings, the group comprise tuba player Theon Cross and two drummers, Tom Skinner and Eddie Hick (who do the work of four). It's not a standard line-up and they are not a standard group. The sound they make is highly percussive with a thick low end: a soupy, intense kind of modern jazz with strong flavours of funk, Afrobeat, rock and reggae.

While the trio lays down energetic, complex rhythms, Hutchings adds a series of dazzling top lines. He is an adventurer. Sometimes – as in the balmy lament which ends the set – his style is soft and lyrical; during a solo interlude, he weaves a gentle spell on the quena, the Andean wooden flute. More often, it comprises a wayfaring repertoire of peals, skronks and squalls.

For 90 minutes there is no chat and barely a pause. By the end, Hutchings and Cross are slugging it out like two prize fighters. Sons of Kemet are a fiercely good band and this was a thrilling show.

Doing the Hokey-Cokey with the Ladies from Afghanistan

Five of them dressed in black from head to foot. We do it in a circle, partly for the children, partly because we're teaching the English words for arms, legs etc. Wednesday morning in St Stephen's church hall. The children have already done *heads, shoulders, knees and toes knees and toes*.

The ladies from Afghanistan do their best to join in, shaking a leg, in out, in out and so on though shaking it all about doesn't come easily and as for the finale – shooting your arms up and shouting *Hoi! That's what it's all about!* – their faces suggest this is nuts.

– Diana Hendry

Television

Finger-wagging and flawed *James Delingpole*

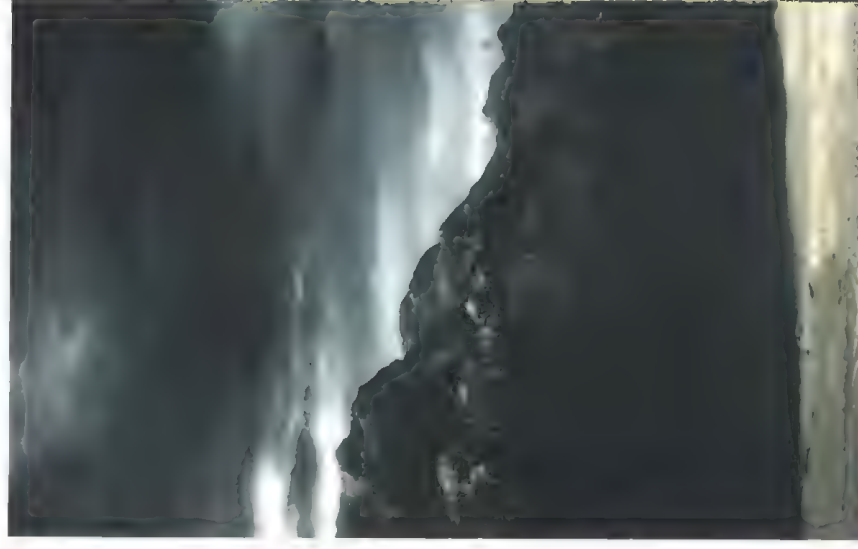
The Sandman

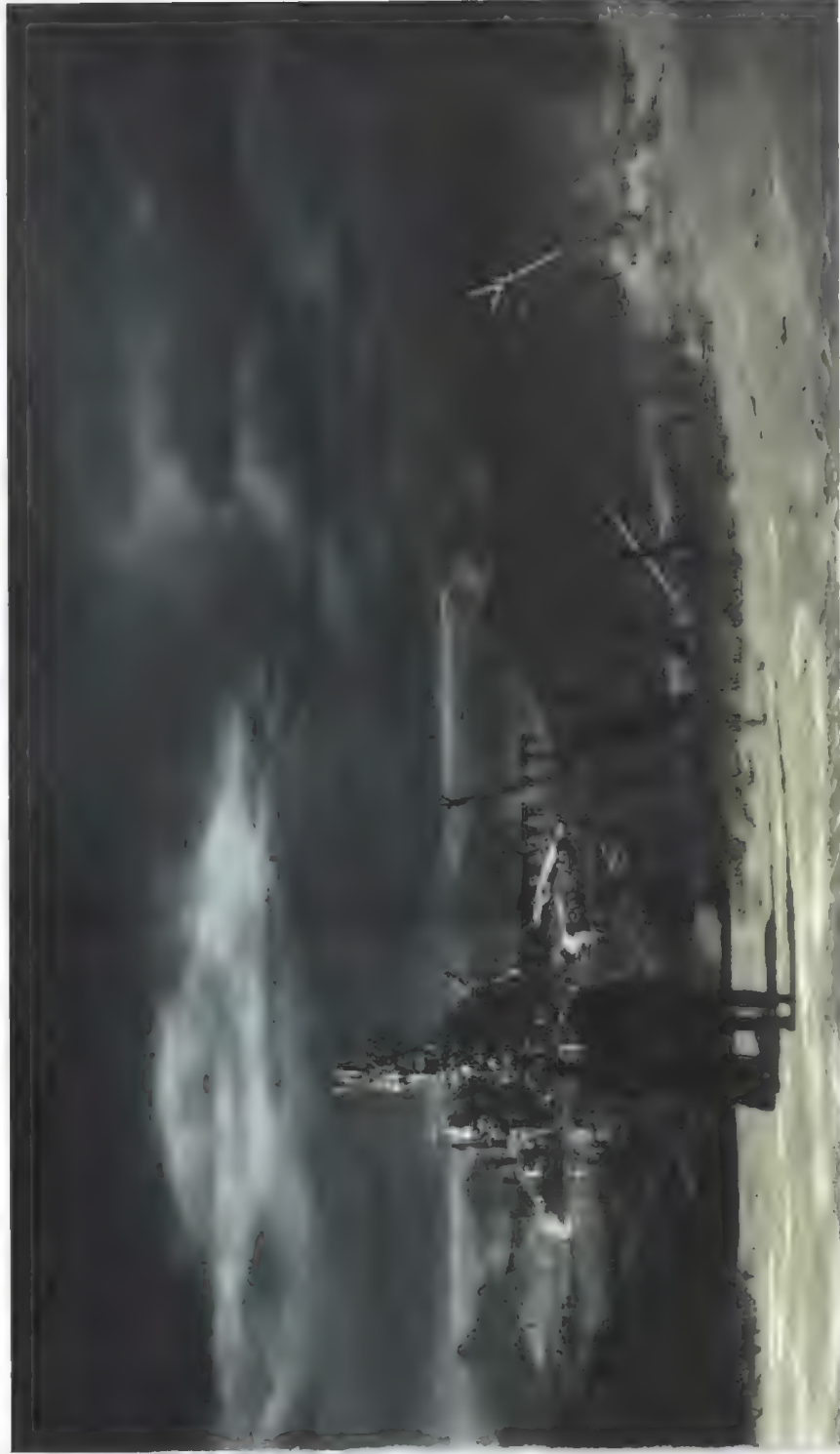
Netflix

'Diversity is woven into the very soul of the story. If those words of praise from a rave review in a left-leaning journal sound to you about as inviting as a cup of cold sick, then my advice would be to stay well clear of *The Sandman*.'

Neil Gaiman's epic graphic novel series (launched in 1989), set in the world of dreams, was relentlessly inclusive long before it became the norm. 'I wanted to change hearts and minds,' Gaiman has said in an interview. 'I had trans friends and still do, and it seemed to me that no one was putting trans characters into comics. And I had a comic.'

If this TV version had been made five years ago, it would probably have been considered very cutting edge. But thanks to recent developments in the world of screen comic book adaptations, it looks awkwardly dated. There's a new mood in TV and Hollywood, exemplified by the shock cancel-



Tom Sturridge as Morpheus and Vivienne Acheampong as Lucienne in *The Sandman*

lation of a \$100 million superhero movie called *Batgirl*, which is widely being seen in the industry as part of a backlash against identity politics.

The man leading this backlash is David Zaslav, new studio boss of Warner Bros Discovery. Zaslav has reportedly had enough of the orgy of political correctness which has overwhelmed the superhero genre, in which Superman, Robin, Wonder Woman and Aquaman were all turned gay or bisexual, and where Batgirl was race swapped. 'The best way to protect your job for the past 11 years in Hollywood was going woke. Now, overnight, it's how you get fired,' an insider tells me.

Well, good! And I'm not just saying this because I'm a reactionary old duffer. My real beef, from a critical perspective, is that whenever a filmmaker prioritises finger-wagging over aesthetics, the end result inevitably is a flawed product.

Take the opening episode of *The Sandman*, set partly in the spectacularly realised dream world (a walled city with phantasmagorical architecture, *Game of Thrones* meets *Harry Potter*) inhabited by the sleepy-voiced chief protagonist, Morpheus (Tom Sturridge), and partly in Edwardian England, where an Aleister Crowley-like magus (Charles Dance) is attempting

to conjure up and capture Death himself. Dance gets his spell a bit wrong and ends up kidnapping Morpheus instead, with terrible consequences for the daytime realm. With the King of Dreams gone awol, a sleeping sickness besets the land, illustrated by a scene of an upper-middle-class black family looking perturbed that their crinoline-dressed daughter will not wake up. The standard defence of this kind of in-your-face

It reminds me of the turgid whimsy of a Tim Burton movie crossed with late-period Doctor Who

anachronism is that in the fantasy genre anything goes. But I'm not so sure. For the fantastical bits to work, surely everything needs to be grounded in verisimilitude. That is, if as a viewer you're going to invest yourself emotionally in a drama's otherworldly vision, the last thing you need is to be jerked back into reality with quibbles like: 'Well hang on. That doesn't look like any version of Edwardian England I can believe in.'

There's also a problem with some of the casting. When you've got actors of the calibre of Charles Dance and David Thewlis performing naturalistically and convincingly, it really doesn't help when one or two of

the other performances scarcely rise above decent school play level. Again, it brings you up short. I shan't name names, that would be cruel. But the feeling I get is that if this production had been a bit more versed in casting basics, all this distracting unevenness could have been avoided.

Even then though I think *The Sandman* would have been hard to endure for more than a couple of episodes. As someone else has noticed, Gaiman is much more interested in 'world building' than he is in developing plot or character. Not unlike in a real dream, it's more a series of vignettes and grotesques and weirdnesses and impressions than it is a compelling, properly realised story. I felt this especially in the scene where, for some tortured reason or other, Morpheus goes to visit a cute gryphon resembling the bastard offspring of Dobby the House Elf and a creature from the ineffably tedious *How To Train Your Dragon*.

The gryphon is owned by a disturbing Tweedledum and Tweedledee comedy duo called Cain and Abel, whose schtick (spoil-er alert) is that Cain keeps killing Abel. It reminds me of the turgid whimsy of a Tim Burton movie crossed with late-period *Doctor Who*. About as involving and welcome as the words: 'I must tell you about this extraordinary dream I had last night.' No thanks.

Hand luggage

By Mark Palmer



The general flying advice this year, with airports resembling cattle markets and when you can't be sure if you're ever going to take off, is: only travel with hand luggage.

Packing a fortnight's holiday into the tiniest of bags has become an art form. Social media is awash with tips on minimalist packing and dedicated websites on travelling light have sprung up, with experts advising what you should, and shouldn't, pack.

It's depressing. Yes, the lighter the plane the less fuel it uses, which is no bad thing for the environment. But a holiday is meant to be an indulgence, a chance to experiment with new outfits. Instead, the less-is-more principle is being abused to such an extreme that we're having to do clothes-washing while away on holiday.

In fact, in a subtle way you're made to feel guilty about taking a jumbo suitcase on holiday – unless you're Coleen Rooney, who normally arrives in Barbados with not just Wayne and her four boys in tow but an army of posh, powder-blue Samsouite Spinner cases (mini ones for the children, maxi ones for mum and dad). Good for her. Coleen can, of course, afford the excess baggage – and the van to take the stuff to Sandy Lane – but, even so,

what a joy it must be to hang all your holiday frocks in cupboards and then quietly sift through them each evening before deciding what might be suitable.

Still, rules are rules. And they are becoming complicated. For example, buy a British Airways economy ticket and you're allowed one piece of hand luggage to put in the overhead locker and one other small item such as a handbag or briefcase to go under the seat. Both can weigh up to 23kg, which is the same weight as a checked-in case when paying for an Economy Plus ticket. Book a British Airways Holidays package (hotel as well as flight) and you are automatically allowed to check in a 23kg bag.

Jet2 operates in the same way: flight only and you pay for hold luggage, whereas a package includes 22kg in the hold. Ryanair is currently charging around £50 per 20kg bag in the hold, while easyJet charges as much as £110. With such high prices, it's not surprising that luggage has become the latest polarising force between the rich and those whom, as Theresa May put it, are 'just about managing'.

It also means that Amazon and others are keen to push books such as the Lonely Planet's *How to Pack for Any Trip*, co-authored by Sarah Barrell. 'The first thing to do is lay everything you want to take out on the bed – and then reduce it by a quarter,' says Barrell, a senior editor at *National Geographic*. 'Then remind yourself that one outfit per day is plenty. Be brutal.'

But where's the fun in that? It's brutal commuting to work each day. It's brutal trying to book an appointment to see your GP. It's brutal (and energy-sapping) making contact with your energy supplier. There are quite enough brutal options out there without adding holiday-packing into the mix.

Mark Palmer is travel editor at the Daily Mail.

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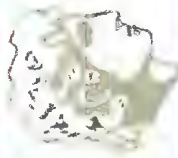
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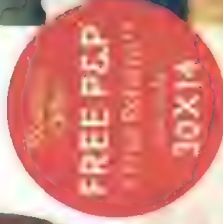
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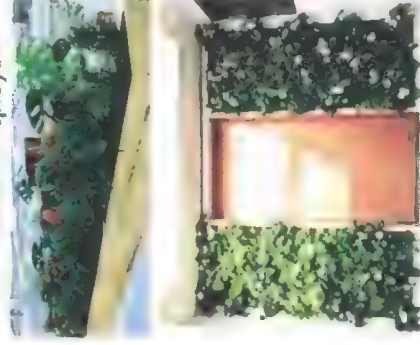


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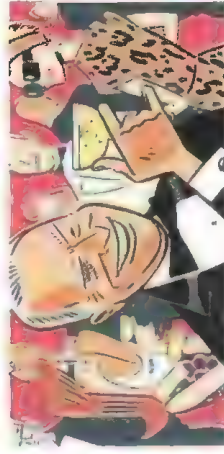
'It's very difficult to sell the last tomato in a tray'

—Rory Sutherland, p61

LIFE

High life

Taki



Coronis
I suppose there's always a first time, and looking back it was bound to happen. I scrambled off a sailing boat and took the coward's way out after being bashed about by an angry Poseidon and a furious Aeolus. Actually it was the wife who couldn't take it any more and I simply went along. Sixty years of being thrown around while giving the middle finger to Aeolus and Poseidon, and during the week of another disaster, my birthday, I threw in the towel and was driven to Coronis.

A deep barometric low caused high winds with gusts of 11 to 12 Beaufort. My captain is something of a history buff and compared the storm to the one that wiped out the Anglo-French fleet in Crimea back in 1854. The Brits and Frogs were there in cahoots with the Turks against the Russians, of course. The Brits lost 21 ships and the French 16. The Russians who suffered fewer lost ships cheered the destruction of their opponents' fleet, and Tsar Nicholas thanked the storm in an Orthodox service. Nineteen days previously, on 25 October 1854, 600 brave horsemen charged the Russian guns and this time the Russkies did not need any help from mother nature; Raglan, Lucan, Cardigan and Nolan took care of that.

The good thing about sailing in hard seas is the discomfort of it, the one that separates the men from the girls, and the fact that when one is sailing one automatically acts like a man. One is polite, gracious, and always ready to take risks when a fellow sailor is in trouble. These traits are unnatural in today's me-me-me world. Mind you, it's thrilling when you're getting smashed by the waves and can see the squall to windward and the bow is rising and rising and then it stands still for a mini-second and then plunges and while it's plunging you think you'll never come up again but then you do and it starts all over again. Those in the cabins below suffered the most, and after ten hours of torture Alexandra threw in the towel of shame and

surrender and the two of us walked off like Saudi and Kuwaiti military heroes.

The Cyclades was the worst part as far as roughness was concerned. According to Greek myth, these isles were once beautiful ocean nymphs, turned to stone when they provoked Poseidon's rage. He was again in a rage although I've no idea what had caused his latest nervous breakdown, as the Taki family sailed west. In nearby Naxos, where Zeus was given his power, allowing him to rule Olympus, my granddaughter used all her powers of persuasion to get dropped off. 'Pappou, I've had enough, if you wish to drown it's OK, you've lived a long life, I'm only 14.' Her prayers were answered in Paros, where she got off with her dad. Alexandra's turn to quit came a few hours later when we reached Serifos.

Apollonian harmony followed upon reaching Coronis, the most perfect private isle in the Greek archipelago – or in any of the seven seas, in fact. I joined my host and hostess for lunch and then the most magnificent sailboat arrived disgorging Edward and Lulu Hutley, Count and Countess Leopold von Bismarck, Sir Bob and Lady Gellodof, and its owner, the great Queen drummer and probably the only reason the group still exists, Roger Taylor. We are all here because it's Pugs Club week, although our president, Prince Pavlos of Greece, is up in Scotland slaughtering grouse. Sir Bob hinted at a coup, but I declined even to discuss it. We don't overthrow our Duce just because of an absence. And we don't wish to look like a Truss-Sunak cockfight, the consequences of which are going to turn Great Britain into Tiny Britain sooner rather than later. Pugs is the world's most exclusive club and getting more exclusive by the year as two Gettys have lost interest, Romeo Arki has moved out west, and the man in the white suit has visited three of our most valued founder members.

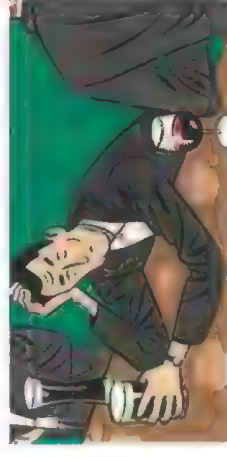
Never mind. *Rock and Roll*, Roger's new sailing boat, is very tough, of a great size and beautifully kept inside and out by a really first-class captain and crew. As I've always insisted, you can tell a man by his boat even easier than by his woman, and judging by *Rock and Roll*, Roger is a first-class fellow and then some. Roger also has a great voice and could have made it big on that alone, but chose the drums, and we got to hear him on a video taken by Ed Hutley that left us open mouthed with admiration. Of all the great times I've spent in Coronis over the past 50 years, this was the merriest,

with Bob Geldof at his witziest, questioning certain privileges we Greeks take for granted, such as having rich fathers, for example. I'm no masochist, but I hold Bob to Hemingway standards. Papa challenged people all the time and could smell a phoney from afar. Bob is a musical Papa instead of a scribbling one, and he now sports a white beard like my idol.

Throughout my stay here I've had a feeling of *fin de saison*, and the wonderful birthday my hosts gave me added to it. (A cake with sugared pics of my book, me doing karate, even a blonde.) Papa defined courage as grace under pressure. There were some pretty courageous people on the island.

Low life

Jeremy Clarke



An isolated Provençal stone farmhouse from the outside; from the inside a comfortable English country house. Sunk into the *garigue* a short distance away is an impossibly blue infinity swimming pool. My two grandsons came here direct from their tiny house in Basingstoke. Catriona was fortuitously asked to house-sit for ten days. I'm the wounded Master of the Revels. We have looked forward to their regular summer visit for months. The presiding unspoken feeling this time was that this might be the Master of the Revels' farewell annual appearance.

The boys have rarely heard a controversial opinion and they rejoice in their grandfather's outspokenness on various delicate subjects; and in his colourful language; and in his habit of appearing at incongruous moments, like an apparition, indoors and out, without a stitch on, saying: 'OK. I'm ready.' They rejoice in his passionate, incomprehensible, probably lunatic denunciations of their brave new world, then having to go and lie down in a darkened room with a fan pointing at him. They rejoice in his whipping out his harmonica and playing it with a brief, demigurgic frenzy – result the same.

Oscar is at that prepubescent stage of bright, engaging confidence and an arresting

beauty that makes you look then look away. On successive evenings a visiting guest has turned to me privately and exclaimed on the beauty, suggesting Tadzio, the beautiful youth in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, as a fictional counterpart. Klynton is an earnest, pensive lad of 11 who never thinks about himself at all.

Both are expert on European football: the clubs, the players, the statistics. They are constantly surprised by my ignorance of the football world outside the English Premier League. But I in turn often amaze them with arcane knowledge of my narrow field. They didn't know, for example, that Sébastien Haller, who sulked and skulked at West Ham for a season, then flourished at Borussia Dortmund, banging in goals right and left, is out for six months with testicular cancer. 'What's that?' said Klynton. 'Bollock cancer,' I said - afterwards our expression of the week. ('What's for tea?', etc.) 'Is that what you've got, Grandad?' asked Klynton later. 'In a sense all male cancer is bollock cancer, my lucky lad,' I said cryptically.

Our days were spent either in the pool or playing Monopoly at a huge stone table shaded by a taut canvas awning. Nature drew attention to itself as biting horseflies, lime-green lizards, hornets, cigales, ants great and small, and a crackling dryness underfoot. And in the evenings by rose and aquamarine celestial commemorative sunsets and a hot wind. And at night by sheet lightning, shooting stars and a fat bobbing moon.

We played Monopoly with focus and seriousness. Even Catriona, normally of a kind and modest disposition - some might say a living sacrifice - becomes imbued with an asset-stripping, capitalist spirit. With eight tycoon eyes focusing like lasers on the board, cheating is impossible. 'Whose go is it?' Oscar's. 'Oscar's in jail.' 'But I paid £50 to get out.' Then follows an acrimonious dispute about the veracity of this statement. Oscar is the battleship. Finally the dispute is

Our days are spent either in the pool or playing Monopoly at a huge stone table shaded by a taut canvas awning

resolved and he rolls the dice. 'Double one. Chance.' He takes a card and reads it out. 'You have bollock cancer. Pay hospital fees of £150.' Klynton (the top hat) is held by a crimson-faced fit of the giggles. He is unable to continue. Grandad fixes Klynton with his disappointed Robert de Niro face. Catriona leafs through her massive wad of 100s and considers her next building project. 'Come on,' says Oscar, impatiently thrusting the dice at Klynton.

After a couple of hours of concentrated, ill-judged wheeling and dealing, Grandad's drugs begin to wear off and he heels over to starboard. I play on as cannon fodder for another half-hour. Finally, I make the

announcement. 'I'm sorry chaps. I've had it. I've got to go and lie down again.' All eyes fall greedily on my meagre assets, to be divided up or auctioned. I'm addicted to stations. Once again I have all four. My weakness for stations is well known, is in fact a joke. Three were purchased at extortionate prices.

Rising shakily from the table, wincing, letting out a little 'Ow!', I could have said to my grandsons, as did John of Gaunt to King Richard II: 'The setting sun, and music at the close / As the last taste of sweets, is sweetest last.' But I've encouraged them to see my weakening condition as farce rather than tragedy. And ever quick on the uptake, they've taken the hint. 'Go on then. Bog off,' says Oscar jovially. 'Yeah, bog right off,' says Klynton, Oscar's faithful echo. We all laugh. I tell them I love them very much and thank them for their great good humour. And off I go.

Real life

Melissa Kite



From the veranda of a small Irish farmhouse, I looked out over the sun-drenched West Cork peninsula. All I could hear was the clank of the boat yard below.

'How much is the booking deposit on this one?'

After two days of viewing farms, I was tired of asking this question. Conveyancing is different in Ireland. As soon as you say you want to buy somewhere you have to transfer money to the estate agent to become 'sale agreed', and it's often as much as 5 per cent.

I had found plenty of tantalising period farmhouses with 20, 30 or even 50 acres, but I couldn't get too excited that they were 'only' £500,000, because that meant I had to come up with £25,000 to get under offer.

'The booking deposit is fully refundable,' the agents kept saying. But what good is that if you're a normal person without a spare £25,000 hanging around in your bank account? Unless you sell your house, you don't have any money to buy another house. It's the English way.

I had driven from northern Cork all the way down to Skibbereen and beyond, stopping at farm after farm. It was a good job the car rental at Cork airport had given me a Toyota hybrid that was so fuel-efficient it was virtually impossible to get the needle to budge on the petrol gauge. After two days of driving up hills and down into valleys, I managed to go through less than a quarter of a tank and spent €20 filling it back up. How

is that possible? I looked up the cost of buying one of these vehicles: £23,259.

It's maddening, having to speculate to accumulate. People with money are the only people who are able to save money. If I had 20 grand to buy a Toyota Corolla I could save hundreds of pounds a month in petrol. If I had 20 grand to put down the booking deposit on an Irish farmhouse I would be able to buy a fantastically cheap lump of land and not stretch myself to the limit buying one acre in Kent, or 15 in Wales, where we would struggle for the rest of our lives to keep horses.

I don't know what I've done with all the 20 grands I've ever had, now I think about it. I suppose they're all trapped in this house on a village green in Surrey, which currently has a For Sale board outside it to no avail.

The first farm I looked at was the magical but wrecked one the builder boyfriend had already viewed. I pulled up at the iron gates ten minutes early, having driven straight from Cork airport. It was like something from a fairy tale. I peeped through the railings and it was an enchanted place. A long white Victorian house with yellow shutters at the windows in a courtyard with birds singing and the wind rustling the trees.

When after ten minutes the agent didn't show, I squeezed around the side of the gate. The house was utterly derelict. Covered in vines, smashed to bits, rotting. The stable yard behind was even worse. There was nothing left in one piece. It was too much for me. After walking the overgrown fields with the agent and asking about the booking deposit, I got in the car and decided to drive.

I wound to the top of a hillside where a wind farm of turbines stood eerily on a ridge in the setting sun as a rainbow burst from the ground to the sky like fire.

An old man on the driveway of a small deserted bungalow waved and smiled as I went by. The moment was sweet enough and sad enough to make me want to cry.

I drove back down and checked into my Airbnb at a house in the village.

The next day, I drove south through a range of hills, stopping only to get out and pet a greyhound sitting in the middle of the road. Again, happy tears.

I ended up in a small village just short of Schull. It was as hot as the South of France.

I ate a piece of quiche from a café that was as good as anything I have ever tasted and sat on a bench outside in the sun. I watched as a camper van full of tourists smashed briefly into the side of a parked car, denting the wing. No one seemed to notice, or mind.

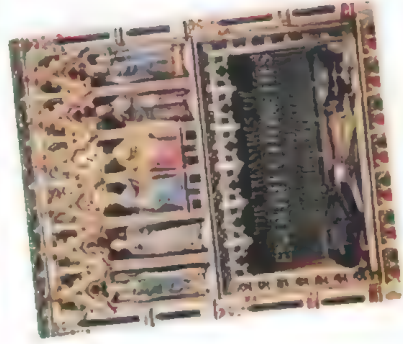
The place seemed frozen in time, oblivious to the sorts of problems I was running from.

By the time the pilot of the budget airline slammed the plane onto the runway so hard the passengers cheered, I was wondering whether I could buy a house by paying the deposit with three credit cards.



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TS - 8-22

Sole Véronique



One of the joys of writing about old-fashioned food is coming across dishes that are new to me, and turn out to be such a delight that they gain a recurring role in my cooking. Of course, some I've encountered were already among my established regulars – boeuf bourguignon, coq au vin. Others were childhood staples – shepherd's pie, proper rice pudding. But a few of the dishes I take into my kitchen to work with I've never even tried before.

The first recipe I wrote for *The Spectator* was for blanchmange. Having grown up during the brief period when milk jelly was fashionable, I'd avoided blanchmange like the plague. I was sure it must be rubbery, flavourless and a bit, well, creepy. Quite a bit of persuasion and research were needed before

It's a simple sauce but a luxurious one, just thick enough to coat the back of a spoon

I was converted: blanchmange is delightful! Cool, wibbly, creamy – and the perfect vehicle for all sorts of flavourings and aromatics.

Likewise, I'd never eaten chicken Marbella before it landed on my desk as a project, despite its ridiculous popularity during its heyday. And what a revelation! Bold, garlicky, winey, and strangely sweet, delicious, and not like anything I'd ever tasted before.

Sole Véronique occupied a similar place in my culinary brain: I knew of it – fish with grapes, right? That didn't sound great, but I'd never eaten it, let alone cooked it. Still, it's a classic dish, and I'm not easily daunted, so I rolled up my sleeves and started peeling grapes.

Sole Véronique is lemon or Dover sole – lemon is substantially cheaper, so that's my preference – poached in wine or vermouth, and then coated in a creamy sauce. And yes, it's served with peeled green grapes.

The dish was created in London by Auguste Escoffier, who's credited with refining French cookery, codifying French classical sauces and creating the à la carte menu. But his legacy also extends to individual dishes: peach Melba, cherries jubilee, dauphinoise potatoes – and sole Véronique.

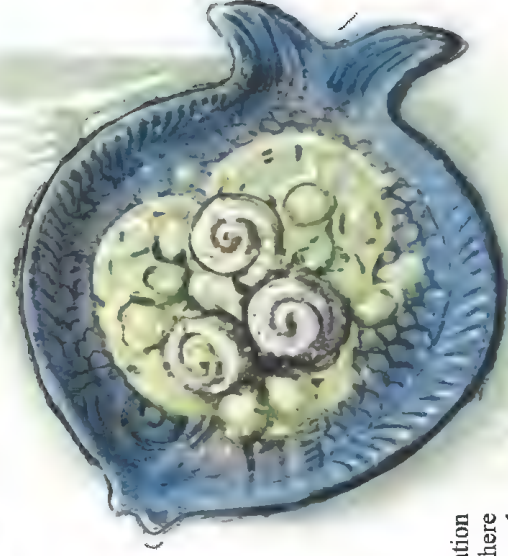
In 1890, Escoffier accepted an invitation to transfer to London's Savoy hotel, where he reorganised the kitchen and enjoyed great renown. Unfortunately, it wasn't to last: despite booming business, profits were decreasing, and fraud was suspected. Investigators were employed to tail Escoffier, and César Ritz (with whom he worked). The suspicions were confirmed and they were unceremoniously booted out. But almost immediately they set up a kitchen at the new Carlton hotel, which became so successful it stole custom from the Savoy.

We know that sole Véronique was invented at the Carlton in tribute to the opera *Véronique*. The exact date of its creation is unclear, but it is likely that it was 1903, when *Véronique* was enjoying a successful run at the Coronet theatre.

Like blanchmange and chicken Marbella, sole Véronique tastes old-fashioned, but in the best possible way. That's probably because poaching fish has fallen a little out of vogue – we do a lot more pan-frying now – but it's a beautiful way of cooking fish ever-so-gently and imbuing both it and any sauce with fantastic flavour. I think we've become quite scared of cooking fish. It often comes complete with bones, skin and guts, requiring specialist knowledge to prepare. It's expensive, and it doesn't take kindly to being overcooked. This dish negates all of that: fillets can be bought ready to cook, and poaching has far more tolerance than the harsher heat of frying, almost inevitably creating moist and tender fish.

The sauce too is foolproof – no emulsions or risk of splitting. The wine used to poach the fish is reduced to a third of its original volume, before you add tarragon and a generous swirl of double cream. It's a simple sauce but a luxurious one, just thick enough to coat the back of a spoon, and demands to be mopped up. The cool, sweet-sour grapes are the perfect complement to the rich, savoury dish. It's almost like that Escoffier knew what he was doing.

To sign up for Olivia Potts's monthly newsletter, which brings together the best of The Spectator's food and drink writing, go to www.spectator.co.uk/oliviapotts



Serves

2 as a main course,
or 4 as a starter

Takes

20 minutes,
plus cooling

- 75g green, seedless grapes
- 20g butter
- 4 skinned fillets of lemon sole
- 175ml white wine
- 1 tbsp fresh tarragon, chopped
- 150ml double cream

1. Prepare the grapes. Submerge them in boiling water for two minutes, then remove and peel. Slice in half and chill until you're ready to use them.
2. Preheat oven to 180°C. Place 8 dots of butter across a small, deep oven dish.
3. Slice the fillets down the middle through the central line, and then roll each half fillet up, starting from the narrow end. Place each rolled fillet onto one of the dots of butter, pour the white wine around the fish, then place in the oven and cook for 15 minutes.
4. Carefully drain the poaching liquid into a small pan. Cover the now drained, cooked fillets with tin foil, and set to one side.
5. Reduce the liquid by two-thirds, add the tarragon and cream, and cook for a minute more. Taste, and season accordingly.
6. Stir the grapes through the sauce. Plate the fish, then pour the sauce generously over the top.

Chess

The first Olympiad

Luke McShane

Everyone remembers their first Olympiad. As I boarded the flight to Chennai last month, it struck me that two full decades have passed since my Olympiad debut in Bled, 2002.

Respectable in the seniority stakes, though one of the charms of this biennial team event is that you can count on meeting someone excited to reminisce about Dubai 1986, or perhaps Lugano 1968, and who hasn't missed one since.

This year, teams from around 200 nations – perhaps 2,000 players in all – made the trip to India. The event was moved from Moscow with just a few months' notice, but any fears about the hasty organisation were quickly allayed.

The country's abundant respect for chess was evident at every level, from the volunteers who met us warmly at the airport, to the presence of Narendra Modi at the opening ceremony.

If international chess can be said to have an oral tradition, then the Olympiad is its most important conduit. The two-week-long event is a generational and cultural melting pot, as retired grandmasters pass on their war stories and hard-won wisdom as captains and coaches. Meanwhile, each edition seems to thrust a number of brilliant young players into the spotlight. (Last week I wrote about the outstanding performance of India's second team, comprised mostly of teenagers.)

This year, England's strongest individual performance came from David Howell, who was awarded a gold medal for his performance on board 3. Unfortunately, our final-round defeat to a dangerous team from Moldova knocked us back in the standings. (A variation from my own rather painful game appears in the puzzle below.)

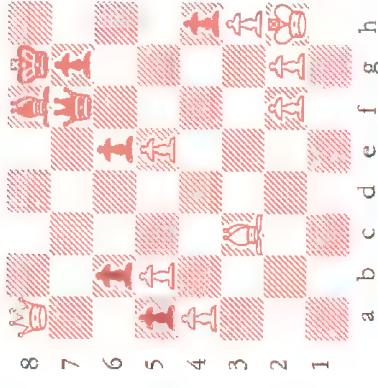
Ireland's second board, Conor Murphy, scored a notable success in Chennai. The Cambridge mathematics graduate lost his final game and narrowly missed out on an individual medal, but his result easily earned him his second grandmaster norm – a major step towards being awarded the title. He showed some fine technique against a strong Iranian grandmaster.

White clearly stands well, but the threat of Qxf2 is hard to meet, since 39 Kg1 Qf4 sets up a

nuisance check on c1. Murphy heads for a bishop endgame, correctly judging that Black's weak pawns on b6 and h4 will become the decisive factor.

Conor Murphy – Amin Tabatabaei
Fide Olympiad, Chennai, July 2022

White to play, position after 38...Bb4-f8



39 Qxf3 Qxf3 40 gxh3 Be7 41 Bdd4 Bdd4 42 f4 Kf7 43 f5 This is not the only way to win, but the method which follows is particularly elegant. **exf5 44 f4 Kc6 45 Kg2 Kd5 46 Bf2** This is the point. The Bd8 is tied to b6 and h4, and the king cannot advance:

46...Kc4 47 Bxb6 Bxb6 48 e6 Bc5 49 b6 and a pawn will promote. So Black marks time.

Kc6 47 Kf3 Kd5 48 Ke2 Ke6 49 Kd3 Kd5

Now, White would like to pass the move to Black, hence the following bishop dance Bf2-e3-d4-f2. It's counterpart has only c7 and d8, so cannot keep its position in parity. **50 Be3 Bc7**

51 Bdd4 Bdd8 52 Bf2 Ke6 In case of 52...g6,

White would repeat the same bishop manoeuvre. **53 Kc4 g5 54 fxg5 Kxe5 55**

Bxh4 Winning a key pawn, and threatening

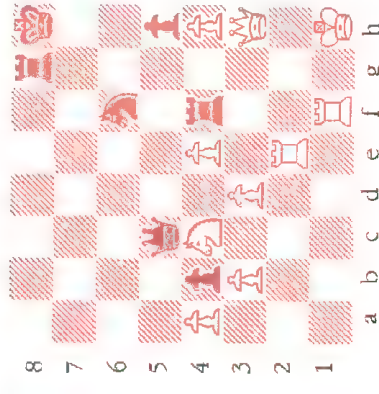
g5-g6. The win follows easily after regrouping

the king. **Ke6 56 Kd3 Bc7 57 Ke3 Kf7 58**

Kf3 Kg6 59 Bg3 Bd8 60 h4 Be7 61 Bf2

Bd8 62 Be3 Kh5 63 Kf4 Kg6 64 Bd4 Bc7+

65 Be5 Bd8 66 Bdd6 Black resigns



PUZZLE NO. 716

Black to play. A variation from McShane-Hamitevici, Chennai 2022. I avoided this position, but lost in a different way. White would be three pawns up, but facing a fierce attack. Which move wins the game for Black? Answers should be emailed to chess@spectator.co.uk by Monday 22 August. There is a prize of £20 for the first correct answer out of a hat. Please include a postal address and allow six weeks for prize delivery.

Last week's solution 1 Qxh7+! Kxh7 2 Ng5+ Kg8 3 h7 mate

Last week's winner Wendy Lott, Warnham, West Sussex

Competition

Initial embarrassment

Lucy Vickery

In Competition No. 3262, you were invited to submit a poem on behalf of Rishi Sunak or Liz Truss in which they set out their stall, the first letters of each line inadvertently spelling out an inappropriate word or phrase. As the Tory leadership contest limps towards its conclusion, you crafted some muscular last-minute pitches on behalf of the two hopefuls. The winners below snaffle £25 each.

Look! I'm the face the country needs!

You've seen the photos – loads! – they're great!

In every one I'm She-Who-Leads

Negotiating for the State!

Grand deals! Delivered round the world!

My Cheddar cheese! What triumph! God!

You wait! Just watch my plans unfurl!

Whack Civil Service pay! How odd –

And in the North! Did I say that?

You shouldn't trust the media lies.

They twist my words! They like a spat!

Oh Brexit! What a dazzling prize!

All taxes cut immediately!

What Boris started I'll maintain!

I'm wedded to his legacy!

No Nolan guff! The same again!

D.A. Prince

Goal one is slash the taxes, after tackling our

inflation,

On top of that, tough crackdowns on illegal

immigration,

Since we must watch our pennies, and in view of

what is spent,

Have corporation tax increase to 25 per cent,

I'll look at offshore wind turbines, cut bills for

energy,

Maintain our defence spending; two per cent of

GDP,

Fiscally, financially, I'm with the common man,

I'll show support for households with my budgetary

plan,

Look into planet mindfulness, emissions down to

none,

Take ethical advisers, choose an independent one,

Have public sector pay deals picked by bodies well

selected,

Your income tax I've pledged to cut the second I'm

elected,

Rishi's ready now to rule; though bills are

astronomic,

I'll steer us through the stormy winds of troubles

economic,

Cost-effective outcomes are my mantra and my

read,

Humble as my life has been, I'm just the one to

lead.

Janine Beacham

In one word: 'tax cuts'. Just like that. Job done.

And by the way, my rival he's a one,

Mr High Taxes in a posh white shirt –

Could steer us up the Swanee, that's a cert.

Unisex toilets? Well, I never did!

Can you imagine that? I say get rid,

Crossword

2569: Anadad

by Pabulum

Knowing that Mrs Thatcher would agree. Oh, by the way, zero U-turns from me, Only from panicked losers left behind By my charisma and sagacious mind, As twice as anti-'woke' as you-know-who, Not to mention that I ousted the EU, And by the way, *did* I announce tax cuts? No double talk from me, no ifs or buts. All you who feel the pinch, I feel your pain. So vote for me. Make Britain great again! *Basil Ransome-Davies*

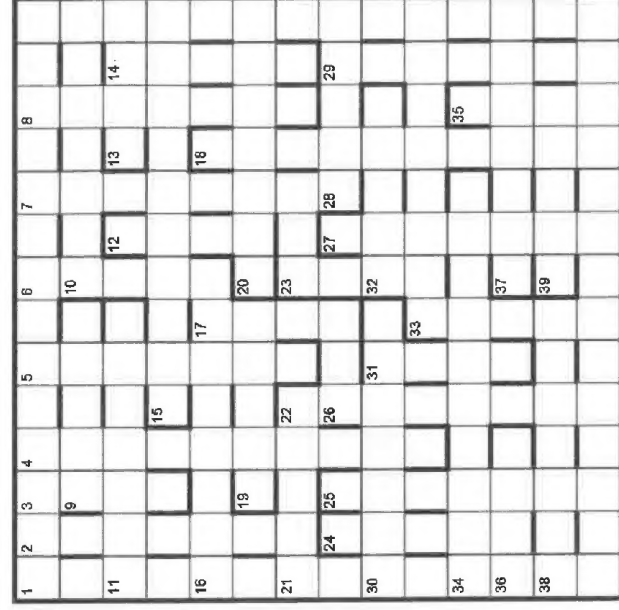
At troubled times of national emergency, New, honourable leadership's a must: Good honest British values, common decency, Integrity, transparency and trust. Equality should have more legal backing: Regard for all in thought and word and deed; A candidness that has been sadly lacking -- Yes, that is what the British people need! Now, if you elect me as your Prime Minister, Everyone in Britain can expect Rich! pure and simple, nothing sinister. I'll speak the truth and treat all with respect; Show courtesy in PMOs and cabinet; Having an end to posturing and vanity, Old practices discarding -- be compassionate, Treat friend and foe alike with some humanity! *David Silverman*

Liz Truss, all woman, doughty, bold and tough, Is ready for the challenges she'll face. Knowing the worst, she'll keep a cracking pace -- Exactly what we need when times are tough. Maybe your smart-shod Sunak is more smooth Yet Liz it is whose dreams are so much bigger, Pep is the thing she has, and vim, and vigour Oh how she'll rock them in the polling booth! True heir to Thatcher, she'll be unafraid To tackle all those problems long ignored. Yes, with Liz you'll be dazzled, never bored, As she storms down the paths that Boris made. Unless you're scared of being victorious No question -- you just have to vote for Liz, The woman with the fervour and the fizz! Your vote is all she needs -- vote, vote for Truss. *George Simmers*

Does not a woman naturally fill Each aspect of our lives with perfect grace, And in the service of the nation, still Remain best suited for the foremost place? Great Margaret showed how things had to be -- Our mighty champion of women's rights! Dressed both for power and femininity --, Now women must always win all the fights. Onwards, Great Liz! Our nation's polity Turned (Mrs T. did not), and forged ahead Towards a new and broad society. Rich men, though clever, must just shake with dread. Unlike her rival, she can dazzle us! Straight, honest, *fidelis in omnibus!* Soon shall a woman be victorious *Brian Murdoch*

NO.3265: GIMME GIMME GIMME

You are invited to submit a letter to a friend asking for a loan as it might have been written by a well-known character (please specify) from the field of fact or fiction. Please email entries of up to 150 words to lucy@spectator.co.uk by midday on 31 August.



Round the grid from 1 runs a quotation (1,3,4,2,5,3,5,3,2,6) from a play followed by the dramatist's name (two words). Two pairs of unclued lights give the name of the speaker and a sparring partner. Elsewhere, ignore an accent.

Across

- 9 Romeo sharing bathroom with a woolly bear? (5)
- 10 The Enemy's former sobriquet (3,4)
- 11 Regrets having to discard poet's jewels (7)
- 13 Brown adult tree shrew (4)
- 15 Triple Martini drunk with endless glee (10)
- 16 Light shedders maybe no bishop makes resentful (8)
- 19 Very silly fish (5)
- 20 The turf, say, found next to yard by Mark (7)
- 21 In a twist, wasting month (5)
- 23 Gathering in heart of Lambeth (3)
- 26 Chap heard shouting (3)
- 28 Strange squaddies gossip in LA (5)
- 30 President once knew half of NY (7)
- 32 Historic mission fashionable couple finally ducked (5)
- 33 Developer's solution is tops, transforming ancient spa (4,4)
- 34 A seventh red-hot chap in trouble (10)
- 36 Watched part of play in the auditorium (4)
- 37 Monarch fills wooden dish (7)
- 38 Disease indeed caught by Tony's girl (7)
- 39 Racketeers bleat about short dress (5)

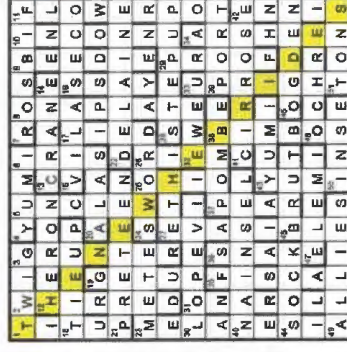
Down

- 2 Nasty double whammy leaving a body in confusion (7)
- 3 French town in Britain? Not on! (4)
- 4 Crazy as insarant maestro (5-5)
- 5 Gorge above river close to Trent (7)
- 6 Nickleby's clerk drinks (5)
- 7 Awful to-do with mere instrument (8)
- 8 Upright Scotsman at home in river (7)
- 14 Not one Nayar ratted (4,1)
- 18 Dovecotes with chimney gull crosses by air (10)
- 22 Dictionaries hairy man's half delighted about (8)
- 24 The steel mobile home (5)
- 25 Get disenchanting and sell up in distress (7)
- 27 Earl of struggling -- may he do well (7)
- 29 Very active April possibly wanting male with soul (2,3,2)
- 33 Barber tries cycling (5)
- 35 Ray's great fault (4)

A first prize of £30 for the first correct solution opened on 5 September. There are two runners-up prizes of £20. Please scan or photograph entries and email them (including the crossword number in the subject field) to crosswords@spectator.co.uk, or post to: Crossword 2569, The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP. Please allow six weeks for prize delivery. The dictionary prize is not available at present.

Name

Address



SOLUTION TO 2566: SOMEWHERE XII

30 July is Independence Day in Vanuatu in MELANESIA (23D). Its capital city is PORT VILA (39/16), one of its volcanoes is LOPEVI (30), an indigenous reptile is the FLOW-ERPOT SNAKE (11/36) and its national anthem is YUMI YUMI YUMI (4/43A/43D). Its former name was THE NEW HEBRIDES (diagonally from 1) which must be shaded. Apostrophe: NAINSEL (40)

First prize Gerry Fairweather, Layer Marney, Essex
Runners-up Michael Debenham, Shrewsbury; Sid Field, Stockton-on-Tees

No sacred cows Bad guys have rights too Toby Young

As a defender of free speech, I'm used to taking up the cudgels on behalf of unsavoury people. To quote Lord Justice Sedley in a famous High Court judgment in 1999, 'Freedom of speech includes not only the inoffensive but the irritating, the contentious, the eccentric, the heretical, the unwelcome and the provocative, provided it does not tend to provoke violence.' But the case of Graham Phillips, who was sanctioned by the British government last month, is one of the hardest I've ever had to wrestle with.

Phillips styles himself an 'independent journalist', but it's far from clear that the additional free-speech protections we apply to journalists should be extended to him. It would be more accurate to describe him as a pro-Russian propagandist. He's a British citizen who's been based in Ukraine, for the most part, since 2010, writing stories and making YouTube videos about football, prostitution, crime, politics and, most recently, Putin's invasion. There's no evidence he's a paid asset of the Russian state, but RT, the state-owned broadcaster, has employed him in the past and in 2015 he was awarded a medal by the Border Service, a branch of the FSB. The former cabinet minister Damian Green has described him as the modern equivalent of Lord Haw-Haw.

Perhaps the most serious allega-

tion against Phillips is that he may have breached international law by interviewing prisoners of war. In April, he broadcast an interview with Aiden Aslin, a British-Ukrainian soldier captured by Russia who has since been sentenced to death. According to the barrister Geoffrey Robertson, this may have been unlawful because the coercive interrogation of prisoners of war for propaganda purposes is contrary to the Geneva Conventions, although Phillips disputes the 'coercive' part, claiming he interviewed Aslin at Aslin's request. He has form in this area. In 2016 he uploaded an interview he'd done with a Ukrainian prisoner of war just before a prisoner exchange – although 'interview' may not be the right word. The prisoner had lost both arms and his sight in a mine blast and Phillips can be heard ridiculing him for blowing himself up.

So, not the sort of 'journalist' most free-speech champions are inclined to defend – and, indeed, I don't know of a single advocacy group that has defended his rights (although Peter Hitchens has). But there is an important civil liberties issue here, because the decision to sanction him – the first British citizen to be sanctioned over Ukraine by our government – was taken without apparent due process.

And being sanctioned is a big deal. Phillips's bank accounts have been frozen, so he is unable to pay the bills on his mortgaged property in England. No well-wishers can pay the bills on his behalf because it's illegal to provide someone on the sanctions list with financial assistance. The majority of his income comes from donations via platforms like Patreon, but he's had to close them down. He has been officially declared a perso-

Graham Phillips is not the sort of 'journalist' free-speech champions are inclined to defend

na non grata, yet without having been found guilty in a court of law.

According to the Foreign Office, the reason for sanctioning Phillips isn't because he's guilty of a crime, but because he 'has produced and published media content that supports and promotes actions and policies which destabilise Ukraine and undermine or threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty, or independence of Ukraine'. That may be true, but why is that a reason to punish him without trial? If Britain was at war with Russia, that would be one thing – some civil liberties need to be suspended during wartime. But we are not.

The problem with this rationale is that it could easily be applied to another video-blogger who is a thorn in the side of one of our allies – Saudi Arabia, for instance – making it a sinister precedent. Indeed, had Corbyn won the last general election and frozen the assets of a dubious journalist taking sides against a communist country he had declared an ally, such as Cuba, we'd be justifiably outraged.

I think those of us who care about free speech need to hold our noses and condemn this decision. If the government thinks Phillips is guilty of a crime, then it should issue an international arrest warrant and bring him to justice. But until he has been convicted in court, he should not be penalised by the state. To punish him without due process is a breach of one of the most sacrosanct principles of English common law, as set out in Magna Carta. If we don't challenge this decision, unappealing though Phillips may be, any one of us could be next.

Toby Young is associate editor of The Spectator.

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